

Archbishop Burke seeks dissident priest's reconciliation

ST. LOUIS - Archbishop Raymond L. Burke of St. Louis said Feb. 5 that he is "safeguarding the unity of the church" by insisting that a suspended and excommunicated priest associated with the lay board of a suppressed parish meet with him.

The archbishop and the priest, Father Marek Bozek, met later that day. Archbishop Burke would not discuss the meeting because he said it was private and pastoral.

A priest of the Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau, Father Bozek was suspended in December 2005 by his bishop for abandoning his assignment and his diocese to take a job as pastor offered to him by St. Stanislaus Kostka Corp. at their church in St. Louis.

St. Stanislaus Kostka Parish was suppressed by the archdiocese over the governing board's refusal to bring parish structures into conformity with canon law. The corporation that runs it is considered to be functioning outside the communion of the church.

In December 2005, Archbishop Burke declared that the six members of the lay board and Father Bozek were excommunicated.

Archbishop Burke said he has been hearing from Catholics who are concerned about the sacraments they are receiving from Father Bozek. Because of the priest's status, any sacraments of penance and confirmation he has administered or any marriages he has witnessed are considered invalid.

In addition, Father Bozek participated in the attempted ordination of two women and has been making statements contrary to church teachings, according to archdiocesan officials. The purpose of the Feb. 5 meeting with him was to urge him to return to his home diocese and seek reconciliation.

“As archbishop, I cannot permit individual priests, like Father Bozek, to damage the unity of the church and so to harm the faithful and give scandal to people in general,” Archbishop Burke said in a statement posted on the archdiocese’s Web site.

“I speak to you out of the deepest concern for the soul of Father Bozek and the souls of all the faithful who may be confused or be led into serious error because of his activities in the archdiocese,” he said.

In an interview with the St. Louis Review, the archdiocesan newspaper, the archbishop noted that he is concerned for Father Bozek.

“He’s a child of God, a member of the church and is an ordained priest. I’ve been telling him since the day he arrived, ‘You need to go back to your own diocese to be reconciled,’” he said.

As it stands now, Father Bozek does not represent Catholic teaching and practice, Archbishop Burke said.

“I can’t imagine that lifelong Polish Catholics who are associated with the former St. Stanislaus Kostka Parish,” he said, “agree that their priest, for instance, should take part in the attempted ordination of two women to the priesthood. Or accept that their priest believes that divorce and remarriage without a declaration of nullity should be accepted. Or are pleased that their priest is rebelling against church authority in general.”

The archbishop would not discuss what was said at the private meeting, but he noted that because Father Bozek made public comments about it and because the priest's actions are in direct conflict with church teachings, as archbishop he has a responsibility to clarify church teachings and the purpose of the meeting and to assist those who may have been misled by Father Bozek.

He also said he would not address the status of St. Stanislaus with Father Bozek. He is willing to discuss it, however, with the board of directors of St. Stanislaus Kostka Corp.

"I've always said to them that the door is open. I negotiated with them over a long period of time, making various proposals," he said.

Father Bozek's failure to seek reconciliation with the church "would necessitate my taking further canonical action in order to keep him from continuing to bring spiritual harm to his own soul and to the soul of others," the archbishop said. That step would be the process for dismissal from the clerical state.

The archbishop said the situation is "profoundly sad for me as archbishop, as it is for all the people of the archdiocese."

St. Stanislaus Kostka, founded 125 years ago to serve Polish Catholic immigrants, was the only remaining parish in the archdiocese in which the pastor was subject to the authority of a lay governing board, a concession made to some ethnic parishes in the 19th century.

In 2002, Archbishop Burke's predecessor, then-Archbishop Justin Rigali, began negotiating with the parish to reorganize it to comply with church law, which gives primary authority in a parish to its pastor.

When Archbishop Burke became head of the St. Louis Archdiocese in December

2003, he took up the issue.

In January 2005 the parish voted 299-5 against a proposal to “turn over all property, funds and parish control” to the archdiocese. A month later Archbishop Burke placed the six-member board under interdict - prohibiting them from receiving the sacraments - and then in December of that year declared that they and their pastor were excommunicated.