

Nashville priest apologizes for comments challenging church teachings

NASHVILLE, Tenn. – In letters to Pope Benedict XVI and to St. Edward Parish in Nashville, Father Joe Pat Breen has retracted and apologized for statements made in an Internet video and subsequent media interviews that Catholics are not obligated to follow teachings of the Catholic Church as defined by the pope and bishops.

In addition, the St. Edward's pastor has agreed to no longer voice his private concerns publicly or in the media as required by a document presented to him by Bishop Edward U. Kmiec in 1993. Bishop Kmiec headed the Nashville Diocese from 1992 until 2004, when he was named bishop of Buffalo, N.Y.

The letter to the parish also indicated that he expects to continue as pastor of St. Edward Parish until Dec. 31, 2011. Father Breen will celebrate the 50th anniversary of his ordination in December 2011.

Father Breen has shared the content of those letters with Nashville Bishop David R. Choby, and the letter to the parish was to be distributed in late August.

Bishop Choby offered Father Breen the choice of retracting and apologizing for his statements or facing the process set forth for the removal of a pastor under canon law when a ministry becomes harmful or ineffective.

The offer came during an Aug. 19 meeting, a little more than two weeks after a video interview with Father Breen posted on the St. Edward Parish website received worldwide attention. It was the bishop's second meeting with Father Breen about his statements contradicting church teaching.

Bishop Choby asked Father Breen to remove the video from the parish site Aug. 6. The video was removed, but copies remain available on the Internet and have been viewed more than 14,000 times.

In the letter to the parish, Father Breen said “the meeting was cordial and fruitful.”

The terms of the 1993 ban put in place by Bishop Kmiec prohibit Father Breen from making statements that disagree with the authentic magisterium of the church.

Although the process to remove a pastor has not been used in recent memory in the Diocese of Nashville, it is used with some regularity in the worldwide church.

“The role of pastor is particularly important as the leader and teacher of a parish,” Bishop Choby said. “The office is a direct link to the authority of the church as instituted by Christ in the apostles and handed down through the popes and bishops. A pastor holds a public office charged with administering, teaching and sanctifying the local community of the faithful. The church expects him to work in unity with its authentic teaching as handed down through the pope and the bishops.

“It is simply wrong to state, as Father Breen has repeatedly, that one’s conscience frees an individual from the truth revealed and instilled in church teaching,” the bishop added. “A deep understanding of church teaching is, in fact essential to a fully formed conscience, and helps guide an individual in making the distinction between one’s opinions and a decision based soundly on the foundation of a rightly formed conscience. One who chooses to act contrary to church teaching acts outside of the revealed truth of God’s will.”

Bishop Choby said that “in recognition of his many years of good work among the people of his parish, I want to give Father Breen every opportunity to correct the errors in his teaching, and gracefully enter retirement, but in any case, his recent public remarks could not stand.”

In the video interview, Father Breen repeated his long-standing calls for the elimination of the discipline of celibacy for priests and encouraged the discussion of the possibility of the ordination of women to the diaconate and priesthood. He also said that the church’s teachings on artificial birth control and divorce are wrong, and attacked the leadership of the church.

Father Breen also criticized the acceptance of former Episcopal priests, some of whom are married, as Catholic priests and said that today’s seminarians “are

intellectually inferior to what the standards were in the past.”

The bishop received hundreds of e-mails of complaint from people in Nashville and around the world.

After a Facebook page was created in support of Father Breen and several parish leaders signed a letter to parishioners asking for support, hundreds of e-mails and letters supporting the priest's comments flowed into the bishop's office. At the 10:30 a.m. Mass at St. Edward Aug. 15, Father Breen thanked parishioners for the letters of support.