Pastor of three city parishes resigns

In a private meeting Nov. 8 at the Catholic Center in downtown Baltimore with Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien and Bishop Denis J. Madden, urban vicar, Father Raymond D. Martin was asked to resign his position as pastor of the Catholic Community of South Baltimore Nov. 8 because of violations of archdiocesan policy and canon law.

Father Martin agreed to resign, according to Sean Caine, archdiocesan director of communications.

"Father Martin's actions over an extended period of time violated church teachings and practices as well as archdiocesan policies," Mr. Caine said. "Father Martin had been advised and given counsel by the bishop's office for the past 18 months, but he continued to disregard that advice. Nobody wanted it to get to this point."

Mr. Caine added, "He is still a priest of the archdiocese and it is our hope that after careful reflection on his actions and his vocation, he will choose to return to healthy, full-time ministry as a priest of the Archdiocese of Baltimore."
At the meeting with Archbishop O'Brien, Father Martin was asked to go on an extended retreat at a monastery in Latrobe, Pa., but, according to the archdiocese, he has declined to do so.

Father John A. Williamson, who had been serving as associate pastor, has been appointed as administrator of the three churches that make up the Catholic Community of South Baltimore – Our Lady of Good Counsel, Holy Cross and St. Mary Star of the Sea.

Parishioners of Our Lady of Good Counsel, Locust Point, were upset by the decision to ask Father Martin to resign. When Father Williamson read the archdiocesan statement formally announcing the reasons why Father Martin was asked to resign at Mass Nov. 11 about 90 percent of the congregation of that packed church walked out.

Parishioners expressed their frustration and anger by chanting "Father Ray" and carrying posters objecting to Father Martin's removal.

The Irish-born Father Martin had served as pastor of Our Lady of Good Counsel since 2000 and as temporary administrator of St. Mary Star of the Sea and Holy Cross in 2002. He was named pastor of those parishes July 1, 2003.

According to the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Father Martin was asked to resign because of several serious violations of church pol¬cy and canon law, and his unwillingness to follow up on agreements with diocesan officials. Among the violations were infractions for employment procedures and liturgical abuses. Specifically, the archdiocese said:

• Father Martin refused to comply fully with the archdiocese's hiring and screening policies. A parish employee was found to have a serious, recent criminal background, which included drug use, drug dealing and theft. After meeting with archdiocesan officials, Father Martin agreed to terminate the employee. However, a month later, the archdiocese learned that Father Martin had not followed through as agreed.

Mr. Caine said the employee screening policies are in place to protect parishioners, their children, church staff members and volunteers from people who may harm them. All parishes, schools and organizations in the archdiocese are required to follow the policies.

• Father Martin participated in the prohibited action of con-celebration of the Eucharist with a non-Catholic minister, violating the Code of Canon Law. At a funeral Mass in October, an Episcopal minister was vested in alb and stole, processed in with the concelebrating priests, proclaimed the Gospel and participated as if a concelebrant by standing with the priests in the semi-circle. It was reported that Father Martin invited the minister to take the Eucharist directly herself from the paten and chalice. These actions were a source of great confusion and scandal for those present and for the larger church, according to the archdiocese.

The archdiocese noted that there are appropriate forms of ecumenical participation at liturgies. However, this was a significant violation of church teaching.

The archdiocese expressed regret that the family of Shir¬ley Doda, a south Baltimore community leader whose funeral included the inappropriate liturgical

actions, was caused additional pain with the publicity surrounding Father Martin's resignation.

It is perfectly appropriate for laity and ministers of other faiths to participate in a funeral service, however, the parts of the Mass reserved to priests and Catholics must be followed, according to church law.

According to Father Richard Hilgartner, a priest of the archdiocese who is now serving as associate director of Secre¬tariat for Liturgy for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, "The church does allow opportunities for ministers of other faiths to participate appropriately in funeral services; unfortunately this went well beyond that."

He said, "The sharing of holy Communion is symbolic of a communion of faith. To share holy Communion communicates an acceptance of belief in the Eucharist and in the teachings and the authority of the Catholic Church. We don't share fully in that communion of faith with Christians of other ecclesial communities, so we do not share in holy Communion. It is what we believe about the Eucha¬rist, which symbolizes and strengthens that communion."

• Father Martin's behavior has been undependable and unpredictable, including his failure to show up for liturgies – including a baptism and a first Communion – and the frequent allowance of dogs, which are reported to have snapped at worshippers and caused complaints, in the church sanctuary/altar area.

In addition to the organized protest at Our Lady of Good Counsel Nov. 11, five parishioners of about 150 in attendance at the Holy Cross Sunday Mass walked out in objection to Father Martin's resignation, and the Catholic Center has received many phone calls and e-mails – both supportive and critical – concerning the issue. "It was the intention of the archdiocese to announce (Father Martin's resignation) at all Masses before it was publicly announced," Father Williamson said in a prepared statement at the Nov. 11 Mass. "However, once information about Father Martin's resignation was obtained by the media, the archdiocese felt it was important to respond in a clear and transparent way."

Mr. Caine said he didn't know how the media found out about the resignation.

“I think that in this day and age, the reasons the archdiocese is giving for taking Father Ray away from us are ridiculous,” said Locust Point resident Kristen Zygala, 33, who was among the parishioners who walked out of the Mass in protest.

“We want our Father Ray back,” said Dawn Bruce, 32, of Locust Point, a lifelong parishioner of Our Lady of Good Counsel. “I don’t know what my future with the (Catholic) Church will be. This whole thing has really shaken me up.” During his homily, Father Williamson urged parishioners to band together during this time of “anger, pain and confusion” to reflect on God’s love, and to understand “we are privileged for all of the wonderful things Father Ray contributed.”

Though Mr. Caine said the archdiocese intends to help parishioners through this time of transition, he acknowledged that it will be difficult right now.