

Vatican bars brother from post as U.S. superior of Maryknoll order

WASHINGTON – Disappointed about being barred by the Vatican from becoming regional superior for the United States of his religious order because he is not a priest, Maryknoll Brother Wayne Fitzpatrick said the decision raised concerns about the role of nonordained people in church leadership positions.

“I think people are baffled, clergy, religious and laity,” Brother Fitzpatrick told Catholic News Service Aug. 25. “If the community is voting for someone and wants someone as its superior, whether it’s Maryknoll or any other community, people are wondering why it should not be granted. I think that’s what we hear.”

Maryknoll priests and brothers elected Brother Fitzpatrick to the position in May. The Vatican’s disapproval of his nomination, sent to the Maryknoll superior general, Father Ed Dougherty, in early August, means the order must conduct a second election to determine who will be its next U.S. superior.

Betsey Guest, community outreach coordinator for Maryknoll, said a new round of balloting was under way. Results will be announced in September.

The Vatican’s stance is consistent with earlier decisions pertaining to the leadership of orders with both priests and brothers. A religious order can petition church authorities seeking permission for a brother to hold certain positions. However, the Vatican traditionally has held that jurisdiction in the church is tied to ordination and has not allowed a lay brother to hold a position that would place him in authority over priests.

For example, in 2002, Vatican officials discarded the election of Capuchin Franciscan Brother Robert Smith, then the president of a Milwaukee Catholic high school, as provincial minister of the Detroit-based St. Joseph Province of the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin, despite the order’s petition to the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

Brother Fitzpatrick, 58, who served on Maryknoll’s general council for two terms

and as the order's secretary-general between 1991 and 2002, said his experience within the order qualified him to be U.S. superior. "The men were saying 'You'd be a person we'd like to see in this leadership position,'" he said.

"I have tremendous gratitude for my Maryknoll community and the tremendous vote of confidence and support I received at the election and even at this time following Rome's decision not to approve," Brother Fitzpatrick told CNS. "I am in gratitude for all our leadership did to petition Rome to seek approval for my election.

"I was disappointed (by the Vatican's decision)," he added. "There's no doubt about that."

Brother Fitzpatrick will continue as his order's director of continuing education and lifelong formation. Previously he was a missionary in Guatemala, ministering in the Mayan community.

"I love my vocation. I love being a missionary. I love being a brother," he said.