

Our Lady of Grace rallies for return of Fr. Joe Gorman



(Cardinal Thomas Collins, right, blesses a student garden at St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School in October, accompanied by Father Joe Gorman. Auroran photo by David Falconer)

By Brock Weir

An extended standing ovation from members of Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church interrupted the words of Bishop Wayne Kirkpatrick at last Saturday's services.

"We know, for the most part, we all love Father Gorman," said The Bishop, as the packed congregation rose to their feet. This was not an ordinary Saturday service, however, it was the first since members of the Our Lady of Grace (OLG) community learned their pastor, Fr. Joe Gorman, had been asked to "take time away" from the parish by Cardinal Thomas Collins of the Archdiocese of Toronto.

The Archdiocese in a statement cited "financial irregularities relating to the financial administration of the parish and serious civil and ecclesiastical irregularities concerning the celebration of the sacrament of matrimony."

Following this initial statement, Bishop Kirkpatrick, followed by an amended statement from Neil MacCarthy, Director of Public Relations and Communications for the Archdiocese, amended the comment to underline Fr. Gorman did not gain personally from these "irregularities", rather "proper procedures" were not followed on "certain special collections."

According to the Archdiocese, Fr. Gorman presided at a wedding of a couple where a divorced party had not received an annulment, which is against requirements of the Catholic Church. Following this incident, the Archdiocese says Fr. Gorman was assigned a "mentor" to ensure future weddings would follow church guidelines, but this was not the case.

A subsequent wedding was performed by Fr. Gorman between two members of the Our Lady of Grace parish in an Anglican chapel "after being advised on more than one occasion this was not permitted", and later indicated on marriage records that a minister from another denomination presided over the service.

"This activity was contrary to the laws of the Catholic Church and violated the Civil Marriage Act, putting his own license to celebrate weddings in jeopardy," said Mr. MacCarthy.

Regarding the violation of the Civil Marriage Act, both the Archdiocese and a source close the issue insist this was not a same sex marriage, rather simply two Catholics he did not have jurisdiction to marry in the chapel.

It has been indicated to The Auroran that Fr. Gorman chalks this up to an 'error in judgement', but the Archdiocese said this has been an 'ongoing pattern of disregarding church procedures.'

In the statement read out to the OLG congregation on Saturday, Bishop Kirkpatrick said Cardinal Thomas Collins asked Fr. Gorman to 'take some time away from the parish' to 'help him reflect on his role as pastor.'

'He remains pastor of Our Lady of Grace and our prayer is that this period of reflection will assist him in his life of priestly ministry,' the statement continued. 'We invite parishioners of Our Lady of Grace to pray for Fr. Gorman in the days ahead and support those who administer the parish in his absence.'

In response to enquiries from The Auroran, Fr. Gorman declined to speak further on the matter at this time.

Parishioners, however, were not content to pray privately, and have been taking their prayers 'and actions' public with an eye of having Fr. Gorman restored to his place at the church.

Ahead of last weekend's services, members of the OLG community fanned out around the church handing out petitions and collecting signatures for a petition urging Cardinal Collins to listen to the community and their concerns.

'We, the parishioners of Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church, ask for your intervention to help heal our community, which has been wounded by the abrupt removal of our pastor, Fr. Joe Gorman,' reads the petition, which has gathered thousands of signatures since going online midday Friday. 'He has been an inspirational and reconciliatory instrument, a role model, especially for our youth, and has been moral support for families in need, particularly the mentally ill, elderly and the poor and grieving.

'Through his joyful Christian spirit, he has brought back to the church many of the members who had left, even non-Catholics.'

Signatories ask the Cardinal to appoint a mediator to assist in Gorman's return to Our Lady of Grace with 'transparency, due process and clear communication to help us through these difficult times.'

These views are reflected in the voices of support offered by members of the congregation, highlighting the need for community involvement in creating a dialogue on the issue at hand.

'We, as the community, should make decisions that impact our parish,' wrote Joe Gajcevic of Newmarket. 'The dark ages of secret meetings and backroom dealings has no place in our parish. The alleged evidence should be looked at by all. We should have a say as a community and not by a select few.'

Others suggested complaints were brought forward by 'pious, holier than thou' individuals which, in the words of parishioner Mary O'Reilly 'steps outside the box.'

'Isn't that exactly what Christ did?' she asked.

'We have been going to OLG for 30+ years and Father Joe is a breath of fresh air,' added Doug Cork of Aurora, voicing his support to the Archdiocese. 'No offence, but not like all the other stodgy, old, unyielding, unfeeling pastors you have put in there before. The times they are changing, so hopefully you guys get it now. Put Father Joe back where he belongs.'

Many members of the OLG community also spoke of their flagging faith which had, they said, been revitalized by the message of Fr. Joe, including youth.

'Fr. Joe singlehandedly kept me interested in my faith and in God throughout my high school experience,' said Genevieve Malcolm, 20, of Aurora. 'As a young adult, religion has not always been at the forefront of my mind, as I have had a hard time reconciling it with the entirety of my life in the past. However, Fr. Joe has helped me to see how God fits in with the bigger picture of my life, along with providing me with relevant and interesting homilies to appreciate. I cannot imagine that I would still be an active

Catholic without his influence.?

A similar view was offered by Pedro Rodrigues. ?Father Joe was the sole reason why my family and I returned back to Our Lady of Grace after a horrible experience with the previous pastor. He gave us hope and strengthened our relationship with Christ.?
Father Joe Gorman was ordained in 2008. He was appointed to lead Our Lady of Grace in May, 2013.