

Excommunicated church thrives despite censure

by [Michael O'Malley](#)

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ROCHESTER, N.Y. (RNS) At Spiritus Christi Church, the choir sings the lyrics of "Amazing Grace" to the tune of "House of the Rising Sun" -- a song about a brothel.

Surely, such a tune for a sacred service would never meet the approval of the Rochester Roman Catholic Diocese. Then again, nothing about Spiritus Christi meets the diocese's approval.

Spiritus Christi is a breakaway parish at odds with the Catholic church. The Rev. James Callan, 63, now the parish's assistant pastor, was fired from the Rochester diocese and excommunicated.

It's a situation not unlike the one facing the Community of St. Peter in Cleveland, where the Rev. Robert Marrone is awaiting "canonical action" after refusing to resign from his breakaway flock. Marrone and his parishioners began worshipping in a leased commercial building last August, four months after their downtown church was shuttered as part of diocesan downsizing plan.

If Spiritus Christi is any clue, there is life after excommunication for churches like St. Peter and others, although it often doesn't look the same as it did before.

The Diocese of Rochester says Spiritus Christi is not a Roman Catholic church: it has a woman pastor, blesses gay unions and serves Communion to anyone, regardless of their faith -- three violations of Catholic teaching.

Callan maintains that his church is "Catholic," calling it the largest such church within Rochester's city limits, with 1,500 members,

33 employees and an annual operating budget of \$1.7 million.

"We're still a Catholic-faith-based church," said parishioner Cindy McClurg, 53, attending a recent Sunday Mass in a packed, 880-seat concert hall downtown. "People say, 'You're not going to make it.' But we are making it. And we've been making it for 12 years."

The Rochester Diocese declined a request for an interview, saying in an email, "We are not in communion with Spiritus Christi Church and do not wish to comment."

Callan and his followers rented space in a Protestant church 12 years ago after locking horns with the diocese over church teachings. At the time, his former church, Corpus Christi, had nearly 3,000 parishioners, eight social service ministries, 70 employees and a \$2.5 million annual budget.

Callan had been raising eyebrows in the diocese for years. Beginning in 1988, he allowed a woman lay leader of the church -- who today serves as its pastor -- to stand with him at the altar and recite prayers only a priest is allowed to say.

In 1993, he started performing marriage services for gay couples. Even before that, he had strayed from church teachings by inviting everyone in the pews to take Communion, even non-Catholics.

"Everyone is welcome at God's table," he said.

The diocese ordered Callan to stop his "liturgical abuses" or face dismissal. He says the diocese took away his salary and health care but promised him he would get his pension when he retires.

Six months later -- after Callan and 1,100 Corpus Christi members had broken away from the diocese, renamed their community Spiritus Christi and leased worship space in a historic Presbyterian church -- he was excommunicated.

At the time, the diocesan chancellor, the Rev. Kevin McKenna, told the local newspaper, "By starting this new church, Father Callan is in schism ... he has excommunicated himself from the Roman Catholic

Church."

The diocese said all his followers had excommunicated themselves as well. Callan said neither the diocese nor the Vatican has presented the defectors with official excommunication documents.

Interviews with Spiritus Christi members show the congregation is generally undaunted about its mass excommunication. Most shrug. Others call it a badge of honor.

"If we have the power to excommunicate ourselves, we certainly have the power to un-excommunicate ourselves," said Sister Margie Henninger, 70, who was ousted from the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester for following the rebels.

Parishioner Margaret Wittman, 82, said, "God doesn't excommunicate. The church excommunicates. The pope excommunicates. But God draws a bigger circle and keeps us in."

The circle at Spiritus Christi includes Mary Ramerman, the woman who had joined Callan at the altar when she worked for the diocese as a lay minister. She had been a pastoral associate for 15 years until she was fired two months after Callan was let go.

"They said I could stay if I don't go near the altar and I stop preaching," said Ramerman. "They also told me I was a pastoral assistant, not a pastoral associate.

"By the time they fired me, I had already decided who I was, and I wasn't going to let them shape me."

Ramerman, 55, who is married with three kids and holds a degree in theology, was ordained in 2001 by a bishop from California who administers outside the Roman rite. She's now pastor of Spiritus Christi.

Callan and Ramerman usually work together, celebrating Masses and performing baptisms, weddings and funerals. Callan still follows some traditions of the Catholic priesthood. "I feel called to the celibate life," he said.

When he tried to buy a grave plot for himself in a church-owned cemetery, he was denied. "I said, `What? I'm more dangerous dead than alive?'" he laughed.

Callan said he bought a plot for himself at a city cemetery where Susan B. Anthony, a pioneer in women's rights, and Frederick Douglass, an ex-slave and abolitionist, are buried. "I'll be in good company there," he said.

The breakaway church owns and operates three houses in the city for social-service programs -- sheltering and counseling recovering substance abusers and people getting out of prison.

It is also preparing to build a 39-unit apartment building with a mix of market-rate and low-income units.

When Callan was excommunicated 12 years ago, he was quoted in The New York Times as saying he believed that within 10 to 12 years the church establishment will catch up with the ideas of Spiritus Christi and embrace them.

Today, he laughs at that notion. "I guess I should have tacked on another 20 years when I said that."