

August, 2020 | In wake of pastor's arrest, Findlay Catholics turn to prayer and each other

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FINDLAY — In their shock, their anger, their sadness and their heartache, parishioners turned to each other.

More than a hundred of them gathered on the grounds of St. Michael the Archangel Parish in Findlay this week, spreading themselves out in the parking lot for a parishioner-led candlelight prayer vigil. In familiar verses and extemporaneous petitions, they prayed for a parish and a community rocked by the previous day's arrest of their pastor on sex abuse-related charges.

"For St. Michael the Archangel Parish," one parishioner offered as a petition, his voice rising clearly above the subdued crowd. "That we will stay strong and get through this together."

"Lord," they responded, echoing the words they say together every Sunday, "hear our prayer."

With a vibrant congregation that encompasses approximately 3,300 families – and as the only Catholic parish firmly in northwest Ohio's Hancock County – St. Michael the Archangel Parish is the largest parish in the 19-county Diocese of Toledo, according to Kelly Donaghy, the diocese's senior director for communications. It covers a downtown stone church and a sprawling campus on the east side of the city, where a newly dedicated church opened with seating for 2,000 in the early 2000s; the parish's main campus also encompasses an affiliated parish school and brand-new convent is for several Dominican Sisters of Mary, based in Ann Arbor.

The parish is now grappling with the arrest of the Rev. Michael Zacharias, the pastor assigned to their parish in 2017, who was federally charged on Tuesday with coercion and enticement, sex trafficking of a minor, and sex trafficking of an adult by force, fraud, or coercion.

As they gathered for a prayer vigil on Wednesday, he remained in custody in Toledo.

Parishioners described their shock and their heartache in light of the arrest this week. They wondered how this could have happened at their parish, and they wondered who would step in to lead their shaken community. And they called for strength in prayer and in each other.

"I said to them 20 years ago, if we are together in prayer, we can do anything," said Monsignor Michael Hohenbrink, a long-time pastor who remains plugged into the parish in his retirement, referring to their major expansion project along Bright Road in the early 2000s.

"The same is true," he continued. "We can come through this in prayer and support for one another and realize that God guides and directs our church."

Father Zacharias, 53, stands accused of grooming and sexually abusing two boys beginning in the late 1990s, when he was a seminarian and they were students at St. Catherine of Siena Parish in Toledo. A criminal complaint filed against him in federal court this week indicates that the abuse continued as the boys grew into adulthood; the priest is accused of helping to fund their drug habits by paying them for oral sex in exchanges that continued, in the case of one of the victims, until as recently as this summer at his diocese-owned residence at Findlay.

FBI Special Agent in Charge Eric Smith told reporters shortly after his arrest that agents believe there are additional victims. They are encouraged to contact the FBI at 216-622-6842.

Claudia Vercellotti, a local leader with the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, said this week that three additional victims have contacted her with allegations against Father Zacharias. She said they have likewise contacted the FBI.

These additional male victims are similar in age to the victims named in the criminal complaint, she said, and they also came in contact with the priest at St. Catherine of Siena.

Ms. Donaghy said late this week that the diocese was not aware of any additional victims that had come forward to diocese, which encourages victims to report first to law enforcement and then also to a diocesan victim assistance coordinator; but she said the diocese had received "calls of concern" that they forwarded to the FBI.

Ms. Vercellotti called on Toledo Bishop Daniel Thomas to reach out and notify all those who have had contact with the priest at any of his parish assignments as a seminarian or as a priest ordained in 2002. Referencing an initial statement in which the bishop expressed his shock and revulsion at the allegations, she called on him to make his actions match his words.

"The bishop needs to put in the same sweat equity that he does for fund-raising," Ms. Vercellotti said. "It's really inexcusable to do anything less."

Father Zacharias served at St. Catherine of Siena Parish in Toledo as a seminarian between 1999 and 2000; St. Peter Parish in Mansfield, Ohio as an associate pastor between 2002 and 2007; St. Mary of the Assumption Parish in Van Wert as pastor between 2007 and 2011, and St. Joseph and St. Ann Parishes in Fremont, according to the Diocese of Toledo.

Ms. Donaghy on Friday shared three additional parishes where Father Zacharias had served stints as a seminarian in the late 1990s: St. Charles Parish in Toledo, St. Rose Parish in Perrysburg, and St. Mary Parish in Sandusky.

Ms. Donaghy said each parish is informing parishioners of his time there.

Bishop Thomas announced that Father Zacharias was put on administrative leave on Tuesday, immediately following his arrest, and said that this was the first allegation that the diocese had heard against the priest. Ms. Donaghy said this week that the diocese will not pay for his legal counsel or any expenses related to his arrest.

The bishop is set to preach at and celebrate liturgies this weekend at St. Michael the Archangel Parish, Ms. Donaghy said, an effort toward pastoral care that she wrote in an email is "of the utmost importance" to him. She said late this week that the bishop was actively working to identify a priest whom he will appoint as parochial administrator to the parish, with that intention that the cleric serve there until a new pastor is named.

Associate Pastor Peter Grodi, the other priest on staff at the parish, was ordained only in June.

Bishop Thomas also addressed the situation this week in a video on Facebook on Thursday.

"Emotions of disbelief, anger and numbness are understandable in the face of these allegations – sentiments which I personally share with you," Bishop Thomas said in part.

"I know for many people that trust in the church has been eroded because of similar historical scandals, and that trust has now been further diminished," he continued. "It is unfathomable that given all that victims have suffered and all the church has endured, given all that has been done and continues to be done to protect children, to demand accountability, to provide a safe environment and to ensure the integrity of the priesthood, still sometimes evil has its way."

"Nevertheless," he said, "be assured that the church cannot and will not tolerate any sexual abuse or misconduct on the part of any cleric."

As she lingered after the prayer vigil in Findlay on Wednesday, Betty Barwig, a parishioner of more than three decades, described a mix of emotions in response to the arrest of her parish pastor: Like the fellow parishioners with whom she'd been in touch in the day and a half since the news broke, she felt shock and disbelief.

She hoped it wouldn't lead anyone to put distance between themselves and their faith.

"I hope that prayer will help to unite us as a parish," she said.

Charlene Wilkins, another dedicated and long-time parishioner who spent years in the parish office before her retirement, took comfort in her community at the vigil.

After months of hurrying in and out of liturgies, out of concern for the coronavirus, she hadn't seen many members of her parish family in a while. And while masks were worn at the vigil, and parishioners maintained distance between families, Ms. Wilkins also shared a few needed hugs.

"We've got to work together," she said. "That's all there is to it."