

Strong, Loving, and Wise!

May 26, 1985

Joseph Cardinal Bernardin
Archbishop of Chicago
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Your Eminence,

Please pardon the tardiness of my communication with you. This letter is both painful and hopeful, and it is the result of many "soul-searching" and painful situations. I was informed by Bishop Gregory that you accepted my resignation. I was assured, at the time, that you have genuine concern for my well being. I am, of course, most appreciative. Your concern is important to me personally.

In an effort to truly cooperate, I have talked to Father Tom Ventura, and have personally sought to have a consultation session with you. I have written this letter to you because it provides a tool for reflection and articulation of some vital points which may be lost, unless adequately expressed to a rightful authority.

The resignation from this ministry and office, in itself, is not so much an admission of failure as it is other things which are not quite apparent on the surface. The situation that has arisen is unique for several reasons. And I feel that it is this very situation which requires reflection and, perhaps, unique action. It is unique from several views; one, because it is not necessarily one that can be judged by those outside the circumstance (though it is true similar circumstances might invite similar solutions, several important situations/circumstances have never, to my knowledge, occurred before); and secondly, though ministry can be similar from parish to parish, in its most intimate circumstances it is indeed unique. It is these very circumstances which have been caused by my request for resignation that have fomented unbelievable pain and (possibly a)tragic situation for many (too many not to take sensitive notice). I would like to number my points for the sake of order and reflection.

1. Whatever I have done in ministry or pastorate I have endeavored to keep those I am obligated to serve foremost in my actions and deliberations. I have always maintained that actions (important ones that is) which are not done with the guidance of the Holy Spirit are fruitless and will possibly end tragically. I have further discerned that one (at least myself) is called to ministry and therefore any movement within ministry is a result of "the call." I have never known this to be otherwise for me. I did not consult, discern, or deliberate with anyone before I wrote my letter to John Philbin. I admit I acted rashly and out of utter frustration. Had I consulted

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with Father Kiley or someone else (from whom I generally seek advice) I would never have sent that letter. This would explain why I never sent a letter directly to you or Bishop Gregory. Thus I am faced with the situation as it exists at this moment. It has rendered me stunned and immobilized. I have never withdrawn from any situation, no matter how difficult, in my life.

2. It was only after Bishop Gregory's visit to me that I began to realize what tragic consequences my resignation would have on many persons. For example, I had read of the success George Clements, Kenny Brigham, and Mike Pflager had when they extended themselves to adopt a child. Though I never felt called to this dimension I found myself moving more and more in the direction of "father image" to many of our young people. I was not surprised at this because it has always been part of myself as a person, as well as my priesthood. I learned to deal with many situations by accepting that parental role. Since our (black) community suffers greatly from a male/father image this was quite understandable. So I was asked, because of desperate circumstances, to take one of the kids to live in the rectory. He received [REDACTED] and the [REDACTED] himself confirmed that his home situation was an impossible one and he definitely should not return there. He has resided here for almost two years. My role has been so strongly parental that he identifies with me as his "real father" and the parish also identifies this situation as such. The tragedy of a forced separation is too horrible to imagine. We have another situation of one of the most active men in our parish, who is a permanent diaconate candidate (just finished his second year in the program. Since he and his family came with me from Saint Catherine of Genoa, he [and his family] find themselves hurt and bewildered. A third circumstance that can be pointed to is the one in which I am sponsoring five kids from Saint Charles to various high schools. This situation arose because these kids would never have any other opportunity to attend a Catholic High School since their parents are too poor to afford the tuition, and in some cases would be left to elements in the public schools which would definitely influence them in the wrong direction. In order to pay for their tuition I offered to teach a few courses to schools where these kids would attend in lieu of tuition. I have done this because I was personally afforded the best educational opportunities possible. It seems that if I am in a position to make a difference in these young kids lives I should do so.

The last example I would submit (though there are many others) is less tangible and more intuitional for one who is indigenous to a community and culture. In my own experience with my people the attainment of any high goal is a means for others to project themselves through that person. Catholic priesthood in the black community has always been regarded as one of the highest achievements a black man can attain. To be appointed a pastor is even rarer. With these built in factors it can easily be seen the type of impact that occurs when a man would voluntarily withdraw from a service or ministry. Even though the explanation may seem sound and reasonable, it leaves the community wounded and in great puzzlement. To my knowledge I can recall only three times when such a thing has happened in our community (i.e. when the black community was directly involved with priest from the Archdiocese). The three cases are Rollins Lambert at St. Dorothy's (and St. James); [REDACTED] when he resigned the priesthood (the impact on the young people is still talked about); and Kenny Brigham when he was pastor at Our Lady of Perpetual Help on the westside. The cases of permanent deacons still upset communities. The shock waves from Father Dennis Riley's resignation from St. Charles Lwanga is still very much talked about. It simply cannot be seen in a "business-as-usual" light. Several things which stand strong in the history of black people is our ability to survive impossible obstacles and our determination to be long suffering. We are expected to stand our ground and the inability for a leader to do so causes the immediate community to have doubts about itself. A white priest, no matter how good and dedicated he may be, if he leaves a certain parish (or even the priesthood) can be rationalized by pointing to the great pressures that exist for him as tries to deal with obstacles outside his element. No such excuse is afforded for a black priest by his own community. (Perhaps my many years as a layman affords me the insight into this perspective.) I am sure that it is not new to you to hear or read that the black community is harder on its own priests (in terms of expectations and demands) than on others who serve it. It is true to say a different yard stick is used. I cannot calculate the consequences of my leaving this community. Nor are there instruments available which could gauge this, since most of any community tends to be silent and non-communicative. I can report that this community has suffered greatly (in terms of confidence and commitment) with the departure of each priest under less than normal circumstances.

3. I have, after a great deal of reflection, come to realize that

in the final analysis it was not my person as priest or minister which caused this to arise but the financial criteria. But it should be seen that my predecessor, Bob Backis, found himself in the same dilemma. I found myself questioning my ability to manage circumstances which I never did have control over. I would have to honestly say that several things caused the pressures to arise which created an impossible situation for myself:

- (1) Having an inadequate knowledge from the beginning of the seriousness of the difficulty of this ministry. No history or suggestions were ever offered by Bob Backis. He gave me a vague sketch of the workings (visible) of the parish; he gave me the keys and left.
- (2) No suggestions were given by the personnel board as to how to avoid the trap Fr. Backis found himself caught in.
- (3) No idea or suggestions were given about the invisible currents (strong as they are) which pervade this community. Thus mistakes and misunderstandings were created which could have been avoided though not easily).
- (4) Too often I found myself not only responsible for, but the blame for a situation which was impossible under any normal circumstance. "We are instructed to carry the cross, not be crushed under it."
- (5) Fr. Phil Kiley, the associate, forced to serve as principal at our school for two years, was not available to alleviate tensions from other quarters; thus, I found myself trying to balance many major problems with no direct aid or assistance.
- (6) An inability to visualize the enormity of the parish's economic situation, and especially that of the geographical area (Pierre Di Vissi calls this the 6th poorest in the nation). This type of impoverishment is impossible to visualize---especially if you were raised middle class and never encountered it before. This poverty is not just a matter of a lack of financial resources. It seems to me, "life is worth living not just surviving. Survival must be at the service of living (i.e. a step towards), not an entity in itself. The pressures and enormity of the difficulties here reduced me to a survival level and exposed me to burnout just as a bare body is exposed to un-filtered sun-light or radiation.
- (7) A much needed restructuring of ministries and parish was slow in formation because the nature of what Iwanga is had to be experienced rather than theorized and rationalized.
- (8) The pastoral dimension was always subjugated to financial difficulties and considerations (or so it seemed). Thus even though ministry has grown, it has not been able to overcome the negative grip and pain which has persisted for years here.
- (9) The historical pains and difficulties are often hard to come to grips with since these are felt by others to be secret and personal.

(10) The inability to balance ministry with financial administration was caused by the fact that financial situations simply consumed enormous amounts of energy. Constant tiredness over trying to manage financial realities so that they were in balance with personal and ministerial needs literally had a draining effect.

The above points are the most obvious and easily graspable for me. There are other points but they are difficult to articulate and pin-point here.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS, AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The one consistent question I have been asked lately is what am I going to do now? My consistent reply is I do not know. I have prayed and reflected much but I have found no discernment which would suggest I have a mission, at this time, which lies beyond Saint Charles Lwanga. I have realistically assessed options available to me such as:

- A Spiritual Director to a convent of Nuns or sisters (perhaps a motherhouse)
- Teaching at a Catholic High School
- Pursuing a degree in Spirituality
(there are no black priest in this field to my knowledge)
- Sabbatical
- Leave of Absence (this makes no sense of course)
- Become a Trappist Monk
- Change in diocese

There are some options I have deliberately shunned for different reasons. My reasons are based on experience and observations of other's experience.

---AN ASSOCIATE AT ANOTHER PARISH...This conclusion does not come as a result of either pride or difficulty of letting pastorship go. In my experience of serving at another parish (and my diaconate parish) I have found myself (and other black priest I have spoken to) often in serious crisis arising from my perceived mandate as indigenous to that community, and another's imposed conceptions as a result of observations and artificial reasoning. This might sound small but having had negative experiences over this I assure you it is not so. The suggestion of serving in the Black Community under a black pastor arises. This sounds easier than it actually is. I have often found myself threatening to white priests (and believe me I have never relied on race to excuse a situation, but it does verify many questions and decisions) from a validation factor (i.e. some

are threatened because they believe black priest have more influence with black people than his peer---obviously false but the perception is widespread from my observation). The same factor holds true for black priests. Why? One explanation could be that black priest serving together (in this Archdiocese, at least) is rare and artificial. There are other problems which are present from the black pastors I know which could never be spoken about in a written report. As I said these are not incidental or rare circumstances which I mention but are widespread. It might mean my roaming around from parish to parish until I found the correct situation. This could easily brand one as a "misfit" when the reality might well be otherwise (as other cases have clearly demonstrated). A younger man might survive such difficulties but at 45 years old it becomes another whole different set of circumstances.

I see and experience myself as a pastoral (more bent toward prayer and strong spirituality, and would find great difficulty fitting into an institutional/bureaucratic dimension. Institutional settings offer their own sets of difficulties and challenges which necessitate certain types of persons to deal with them, I am not and, at my age, never will be that type of person (as I see it at this moment).

I suppose the natural question that might arise is what would I then propose?

Of all the things I have learned from this experience, at St. Charles Lwanga, is that ministry here needs revision and a different approach. I am surprised that this was not seen by Fr. Backis. I am absolutely convinced that the only pastoral approach to this parish that will bear success is TEAM MINISTRY (another term, I suppose, is SHARED MINISTRY). My reasons are as follows:

(1) Team ministry in this situation recognizes and appreciates the fact that different ministries require different approaches. Some parishes are good for team ministry because of educational or social levels of the people, others because it represents a way of diffusing energy consuming pressures.

An associate pastor might not desire to share decision making and responsibility with a pastor, but could easily do so if he understood himself as part of a team of peers.

(2) Team ministry allows individual members, recognizing their own personal strengths and weaknesses, to minister

according to gifts and talents, rather than out of appointed offices and roles.

(3) Restructuring under a Team/Shared Ministry concept allows changes to take place at the top without shattering the community's existing operations. It is more easily seen by the community as a viable approach than one which simply announces "more-of-the-same."

(4) Team/shared ministry announces/demonstrates a different leadership approach. The pressure pact community finds itself more able to operate smoothly, as difficulties and pressures are diffused by members of the team working on strengths out of strengths, rather than an approach which finds ones energy diffused and dissipated by being constantly overwhelmed.

(5) Team ministry is ideal for St. Charles Lwanga because the nature of the enormous pressures and strengths required to do these ministries. This is not a normal ministry by any stretch of the imagination. It requires an approach which deals directly with the difficulties and strengths of this ministry (recognizing and appreciating the enormous energy it takes to minister here).

(6) No human being can guarantee success from any approach to ministry or anything else; but we do know that previous attempts from more traditional approaches have proven not so successful. It is worth the effort because it speaks directly to all the problems which have arisen. The Team approach carries its own strengths and weaknesses, but in a community like St. Charles, the strengths outweigh the weaknesses by a large measure.

I would, therefore, propose specifically the following:

(1) That Father Kiley and myself be allowed to reorganize under a TEAM MINISTRY approach. This would mean specifically---father Kiley would be concerned with financial and fiscal concerns, while father Stewart would concern himself with pastoral and spiritual, Youth concerns.

(2) That the date of our service be continuous with our present date, and that an evaluation of that service would take place at the end of the regular term of service 1988. A yearly evaluative assessment could certainly be made. At least it should be given and deserves a chance. Since the lives and sensitive situations really are in question.

Since no letter of resignation has yet been given to the parish it would not represent indecision or a perception of lack of stability in leadership to our people.

I would respectfully ask that this request be granted. My frustration and energy drain did not result from pastoral ministry but from the burden of having to bear both pastoral and financial administration responsibilities. (Fr. Kiley has served as principal in our elementary school for the past two years. Thus Fr. Kiley has been limited in what responsibilities he could assume in the parish. Working together with John Philbin, Frank O'Connor, the accountant, Mr. [REDACTED], Fr. Kiley would be able to focus on unification of resources. His two years as administrator of the school should give him great insight into the parish operation as a whole. Fr. Kiley has an enormous capacity for this type of task. I would be available to support and to answer questions which would arise---should he need such.

I have spoken to Fr. Kiley and he agrees this would be the best approach for this situation. I have spoken to our staff and they also concur. I have requested that Fr. Kiley add his own comments, recommendations and assessments. I do not ask your approval because it solves all "my" problems and difficulties but because of the unusual nature of the circumstance and ministry. I assure you I am a faithful son of the Church and my interest is due to my commitment to ministry and the People of St. Charles Lwanga whom I have come to love very much. I believe it is the one solution which addresses all the problems and difficulties of this complex ministry.

Your servant in the Lord,
Victor
FATHER Victor E. Stewart

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cc: Bishop Wilton Gregory
Fr. John Calicott
Fr. Phil Kiley
Personnel Board