

# Virginia Bishop Cracks Down On Disobedient Priest

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(Special to the Wanderer)

WASHINGTON — Bishop John J. Russell of Richmond has removed Fr. Robert J. Walsh, pastor of St. Mark's Church, Vienna, Va., for employing the unauthorized Communion-in-the-hand method of distributing the Blessed Sacrament and for repeatedly ignoring orders to desist. Demoted and transferred,

Fr. Walsh is to become an assistant in Portsmouth, Va., while the pastorate at St. Mark's goes to Fr. Robert C. Brooks.

Bishop Russell's action came after several warnings, public and private. At one point, Fr. Walsh had been asked to come to Richmond to discuss his activities. His reply, according to the *Washington Post*, was, "Hell, no. If they want to talk to me, let them come here." Finally the Bishop sent Fr. Walsh a letter commanding him to desist from the unauthorized practice and binding him "in holy obedience." When, thereafter, the Bishop again received reports of Fr. Walsh's disobedience, he had no choice but to act as he has. His decision was announced October 25th.

Bishop Russell's dramatic move must be seen against the background of the religious situation in the northern Virginia suburbs. By all accounts, it is one of the most "polarized," places in the Catholic Church in America. On one extreme, there are "underground churches," like the infamous "Nova community," where leaders of the Liturgical Conference are known to hang out. On the other extreme is the schismatic "Latin Rite" congregation called "St. Athanasius." Northern Virginia is a place where several recent attempts have been made by unknown persons to pry open tabernacles, and where an eager crowd of several hundred gathered

recently to hear weird "prophecies" about the suppression of the Mass.

The same polarization has been at work in Fr. Walsh's own St. Mark's. Some of his own parishioners denounced him to Bishop Russell, while other parishioners are now resorting to sit-in tactics and a lawsuit to support the deposed pastor. Bishop

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Russell is conscious, no doubt, that the unity of the Church can be preserved in such a situation only if all parties are strictly bound by the same rules, canonically and rubrically. If the Bishop allows "progressive" churchmen to do as they please, he destroys his own credibility in trying to restrain "right wing" schismatics, and vice versa.

Such pastoral reasoning appears to have been lost, however, on Fr. Walsh's fanatical supporters. They have blockaded the rectory to prevent the new pastor, Fr. Brooks, from taking up residence; and finally, securing the legal services of a man named Wyatt Durette, the parish council has filed a civil suit to prevent Bishop Russell from removing Walsh (thus acting in contempt of canon law as well as both the spirit and the letter of the New Testament). It is not even clear that the parish council has standing to bring such a suit, since according to diocesan rules, "the parish advisory board shall serve as a consultative and advisory body to the pastor . . . the board has no directive, operational, or administrative authority."

The basically anti-Catholic character of the council's suit is revealed in both its contentions. The first is that Bishop Russell did not submit to certain "due process" procedures alleged to be normative in the Diocese. The Bishop maintains that he is free to use these procedures or not; otherwise it is impossible to see how he could retain his authority to bind anyone in religious obedience. The second contention holds that the Bishop is not really the owner of the church property but only a kind of "trustee" who has to use the property "in the best interests of the people of the parish." But obviously, if a secular court of law can determine that a Catholic Bishop has violated these "interests," then it follows (1) that the Bishop is deprived of all real authority, and (2) that the "interests" of the parish are not really Catholic but secular.

In the face of these actions, Bishop Russell has insisted, evermore strongly, that he will not and in conscience can not "back down."

Meanwhile, almost forgotten, there is the strange behavior of Fr. Walsh. The Sunday after he was notified of his deposition, Fr. Walsh preached at all Masses. People jammed the aisles,

especially at the 10:30 a.m. service. His subject was obedience.

Mankind is "born to be obedient, and when we are obedient we are free," he said. "Obedience is trust, but I can't be obedient unless the one or ones to whom I give my mind and heart keep the trust." Without mentioning Bishop Russell by name, Walsh complained of divided authority, of "having to listen to two voices at the same time." The one to be obeyed, he said, "is the one you can trust."

Citing the religious vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, Walsh claimed that "obedience is the pinnacle." Then he went on, "In all my 57 years and still, I have never been able to apply to myself the motto that a man's house is his castle. Instead, I've always lived in obedience. I've never for one moment suggested that I am without sin, anymore than any man, but if anybody wants to stab me in the heart — let him call me any dirty thing they want to call

me —" he paused, gripped the edges of the pulpit and roared, "but don't say I'm a disobedient man."

The congregation sat in stunned silence as tears welled in Fr. Walsh's eyes, then burst into a standing ovation, as the priest strode down the aisle and out the front door.

Fr. Walsh's dilemma is not new. Didn't Our Lord say something about the luckless state of those who claim to two masters?