

7-28-08 - Dedicated St. Louis priest like others you know

By TOM FOX, NCR staff writer, National Catholic Reporter

Fr. Gerry Kleba, pastor of St. Cronan Parish, St. Louis, leads the Palm Sunday procession. If you don't know Fr. Gerry Kleba you probably know a priest like him.

Kleba is one of those inner-city parish priests we have stumbled across and admired. This "Kleba" has worked tirelessly in the inner city of St. Louis through the last four decades. For the last six years, he has been pastor of St. Cronan parish, which inadvertently brought him unexpected attention after Sister of Charity Louise Lears, a pastoral associate in the parish, was banished last month by St. Louis Archbishop Raymond Burke.

Lears was told to stop all archdiocesan ministries and stop participating in the sacraments within the archdiocese for her support of women's ordination.

A week later, another pastoral associate, Sean Collins, resigned largely as a protest to the action against Lears.

These moves have left Kleba without pastoral associates and carrying an unexpected, larger load within the parish.

I called Kleba recently to find out how he was doing. I found him to be a man of considerable faith and conviction and by the time I hung up I felt I knew this priest or had known priests like him.

You know the type. He is the giver that keeps on giving.

An example might illustrate the case. Last year, Kleba reached a milestone. To mark his 200 pint blood donation he asked 200 friends to help him celebrate by giving themselves.

Being a blood donor is a way of being pro-life, he told the local archdiocesan paper, The St. Louis Review. The slogan for blood donation, he said, could be: "No greater love has anyone than to stick out an arm for their friends."

On the phone, I asked him how he is holding up, having lost two mainstay ministers in the parish. He says he's doing OK and the parish is going to learn from the experience.

The parishioners, he said, are "being challenged to deepen their faith."

Kleba sees the hand of God in all things. "Somehow there is a blessing here," he explained. "For those who love God, all things work together unto good."

He said he hopes the parish will come through the turmoil "a much better parish."

"We are gold being tested by fire. And we are getting to know who we are, congenial, confident, and peaceful people."

Kleba does not hide his thoughts about Lears' departure. He says he feels she was treated unfairly by the archbishop.

Speaking about a meeting he had with Archbishop Burke earlier this year, Kleba said, "He called me in and one of the things he wanted me to do was fire Sr. Louise and I said that this case is still open and I have to assume that while I don't know much canon law, a person is innocent until proven guilty."

"I told him I couldn't fire her. He told me to seek out some further advice."

So I decided to get a lawyer.

That move cost Kleba \$790. The amount was more than it cost him four decades back to be ordained a priest, he said.

An e-mail he sent out to friends following his visit with Burke was critical of the archbishop's action in the Lears' case. The e-mail eventually got circulated on the Internet.

But he's not worried. "What have I got to lose?" he asked.

Kleba, at 66, is at an age when many other Americans his age are retiring. He has no plans to retire. His work, he says, is going forward.

Just like a lot of other retirement aged inner city priests we know.