

8-5-08 - In Harlem, Shock and Anger at Pastor's Removal

By PAUL VITELLO, The New York Times

It may not be the most heavily attended church in the area, but the imposing Roman Catholic church on 141st Street, St. Charles Borromeo, known locally as Harlem's Cathedral, has become known in recent years for such stirring triumphs and humbling lows that some people see it as a kind of tragic, if not bipolar, character residing in the neighborhood.

Pope John Paul II visited the church in 1979, and people still remember the pomp and pageantry it brought to the block. But the man most responsible for that visitation — the church's pastor at the time, Msgr. Emerson J. Moore, a rising star who in just a few years would become the first black bishop in the Archdiocese of New York — died in a Minnesota AIDS hospice in 1995 after a long battle with cocaine and alcohol addiction.

And now, with another rising star at the helm — Msgr. Wallace A. Harris, who gave an invocation at Gov. David A. Paterson's inauguration and like his predecessor, Bishop Moore, took a leading role in organizing the most recent papal visit to New York — the pendulum has swung once again.

On Sunday, parishioners at Mass were told that the archdiocese had removed Monsignor Harris from his parish and priestly duties while it looked into complaints by two people that he had sexually abused them about 20 years ago.

Neither the archdiocese nor the Manhattan district attorney's office would provide more details. But people familiar with the district attorney's investigation said the complaints involved the fondling of two boys, about 13 or 14 years old, when they were students at the Cathedral School in Manhattan, where Monsignor Harris was assigned before becoming pastor at St. Charles Borromeo.

"Must be something about that building," said Roger Firby, 50, a retired corrections officer who has lived most of his life within walking distance of the church. "Always got some trouble."

Another priest assigned to the parish was convicted of molesting a 12-year-old girl in 2003 and sentenced to a prison term of four months.

"It is just so unfair that we are known for these things, especially to Pastor Harris," said Trina Tuckett, a longtime parishioner and a former member of the parish's board of directors, who joined a steady stream of congregants who walked by the locked doors of the church on Monday — most of them voicing disbelief, anger and confusion.

"He is a fine human being," she said. "He has brought nothing but good to this community. How do we know that these charges are not made up? Why are they bringing this up 20 years later?"

Joseph Zwilling, spokesman for the archdiocese, said the first accuser came to the archdiocese in June. After an internal investigation, he said, the church sent the case to the district attorney's office, but did not remove Monsignor Harris because it is church policy "not to alert the target" of a potential criminal investigation.

During the district attorney's investigation, the second accusation against Monsignor Harris emerged, and the diocese ordered him to step aside, Mr. Zwilling said. The five-year statute of limitations has lapsed in both cases, and charges are not likely to be brought, said Alicia Maxey Greene, a spokeswoman for the prosecutor's office.

The archdiocese still must decide whether Monsignor Harris will be returned to his duties, "returned to the lay state," or permitted to retire to "a life of prayer and penance," an inactive status, Mr. Zwilling said. Monsignor Harris is one of 15 archdiocesan priests who have been removed since 2002 on sexual abuse allegations, with just one returning to his post, he said.

Monsignor Harris, 61, is widely known in Harlem for his church's charity works, and known in the community of 648 priests who serve in the Archdiocese of New York as an expert organizer and charismatic leader. He is the chairman of the archdiocesan priests' council, a position to which he was elected by the priests. He was appointed by Cardinal Edward M. Egan as vicar of central Harlem, one of five vicariates in the five boroughs.

Monsignor Harris could not be reached for comment on Monday.

At the church, a parishioner put up two posters expressing support on Monday, while others spoke emotionally of their affection for him.

Ms. Tuckett, an elementary school teacher, said people not only liked Monsignor Harris but respected him as a man with great managerial skills. "Look how well he handled Yankee Stadium," she said.

The monsignor was assigned to coordinate Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Yankee Stadium in April — and it is part of local legend that the task involved making sure that 100,000 ponchos were ready in case of rain. "How many people could do that?" Ms. Tuckett said. "He is a very smart man; he makes things work like clockwork."

Naje George, 16, who said she was an altar server, wept as she described the way she learned of the monsignor's removal. She said that a priest from another parish said Mass, and that in the middle of the service, he read a statement from the archdiocese that Monsignor Harris would be on leave until further notice.

"They should have let him talk to his parish," she said. "He should have been given that respect. We should have been given that respect. Everyone hates the way they did it."

Paulette Nixon, a member of the church choir, said that in 20 years she had never seen the pastor "make an inappropriate move" of any kind toward anyone, male or female. She said theirs was a close-knit congregation, and that many of its members were professional and managerial workers.

"This is the kind of church where if you don't show up on a Sunday morning, you get a call from someone at the rectory, to find out if you are O.K.," she said.

David Clohessy, national director of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, said the complaints against Monsignor Harris were among a cluster of recent cases involving "more politically powerful and personally charismatic" priests accused of sexually abusing young parishioners.

He referred to Monsignor Dale Fushek of Phoenix, who founded Active Christian Teens, and the Rev. Donald McGuire of Chicago, a Jesuit priest who was close to Mother Teresa, both of whom were charged in the last two years. "In many ways, the predators who are still out there are the most sophisticated and well-connected," Mr. Clohessy said.

Some of Monsignor Harris's neighbors and parish members said they didn't see him that way.

"When I came to his services, I knew I was receiving pastoral care in the best sense," said Paulette Nixon, a choir member. She said that being accustomed to some of the wild swings of the past decade in her church's life, she expected to see Monsignor Harris back in the pulpit.

But meanwhile, she added, "Pastor Harris is welcome in my house."

John Eligon and William K. Rashbaum contributed reporting.