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Parishioners Saddened As Pastor Leaves

By Joyce Shelby
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New York — Despite dozens of phone calls, faxes and hundreds of letters from parishioners, a beloved Bensonhurst priest today is leaving the parish he has served as pastor for the past 19 years.

"We are very disappointed, heartbroken," said Millie Marolla, a member of St. Finbar's Catholic parish since 1965, of the departure of the Rev. Anthony Failla.

"Through Father Failla, the parish came alive," she said.

Marolla said when Failla arrived 19 years ago, the church was falling apart. "The roof was leaking, the electrical wiring wasn't up to par, the paint was chipped and peeling."

The church undertook renovations on the exterior and interior of the church.

Members say more important than the physical improvements were the activities that kept St. Finbar's bustling under Failla's leadership.

Eileen LaRuffa, who has done the church's bulletin for 25 years, said: "Up until last year, when there was no more funding from the city, we had a homeless residence where people stayed. We have Alcoholics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous and AMICO, the Italian-American organization that helps people.

"He brought so many services to our community. That's why everyone is so upset. And Father Failla allowed us to do a lot of things that were fun religious-wise and community-wise," LaRuffa said.

Parishioners at first thought Failla was being forced out against his will. Marolla said about 1,200 people including parishioners, politicians and students from St. Finbar's school wrote to Bishop Thomas Daily, head of the Diocese of Brooklyn and Queens, asking him not to reassign Failla from St. Finbar's. There also were numerous phone calls and faxes, she said.

However, Frank DeRosa, spokesman for the diocese, said the priest had requested not to return to St. Finbar for personal health reasons that he discussed with Daily.

"Father Failla asked not to be renewed as a pastor," DeRosa said. He has not been reassigned to another parish."

Failla said yesterday that the outpouring of support was very kind. "But I've had my goodbyes. It's time to move on," he said.

He broke the news to the parish in Sunday's bulletin.

"I have been blessed," he wrote. "A priest always has his bags packed. When a priest is ordained, he promises to the bishop and his predecessors obedience. And so, from time to time, he must move from one assignment to another."

The new pastor at St. Finbar, appointed to start today, is Msgr. Anthony Danna of Sacred Heart-St.

Stephen's Church in Carroll Gardens.

LaRuffa predicted that the parish would eventually adjust to a new pastor. "But it's going to be hard," she said.

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