News

St. Ignatius of Loyola Parish's sanctuary, decorated for Easter (Courtesy of Kathy Murzyn)

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"It has just been a heartbreaking year," said Jesuit Fr. Dirk Dunfee.

In September 2022, parishioners at Denver's St. Ignatius Loyola Parish, where Dunfee was serving as pastor, learned that the Jesuits would be leaving their parish after almost 100 years of service. And beyond their community, it would mark an end to Jesuit parish ministry across the state of Colorado.

"As you may know, the number of Jesuits is declining, both worldwide and in our province. After much prayer and discussion, I have reached the difficult decision to withdraw Jesuits," wrote Jesuit Fr. Thomas Greene, provincial superior of the Jesuits USA Central and Southern Province, in a letter announcing the decision.

Jennifer Fairweather, a lifelong Loyola parishioner and Lady of Peter Claver, remembers reading the news in an email, "in absolute shock."

"It was a lot like you found out that someone had passed because, at that moment, you knew that nothing would ever be the same," said Fairweather.

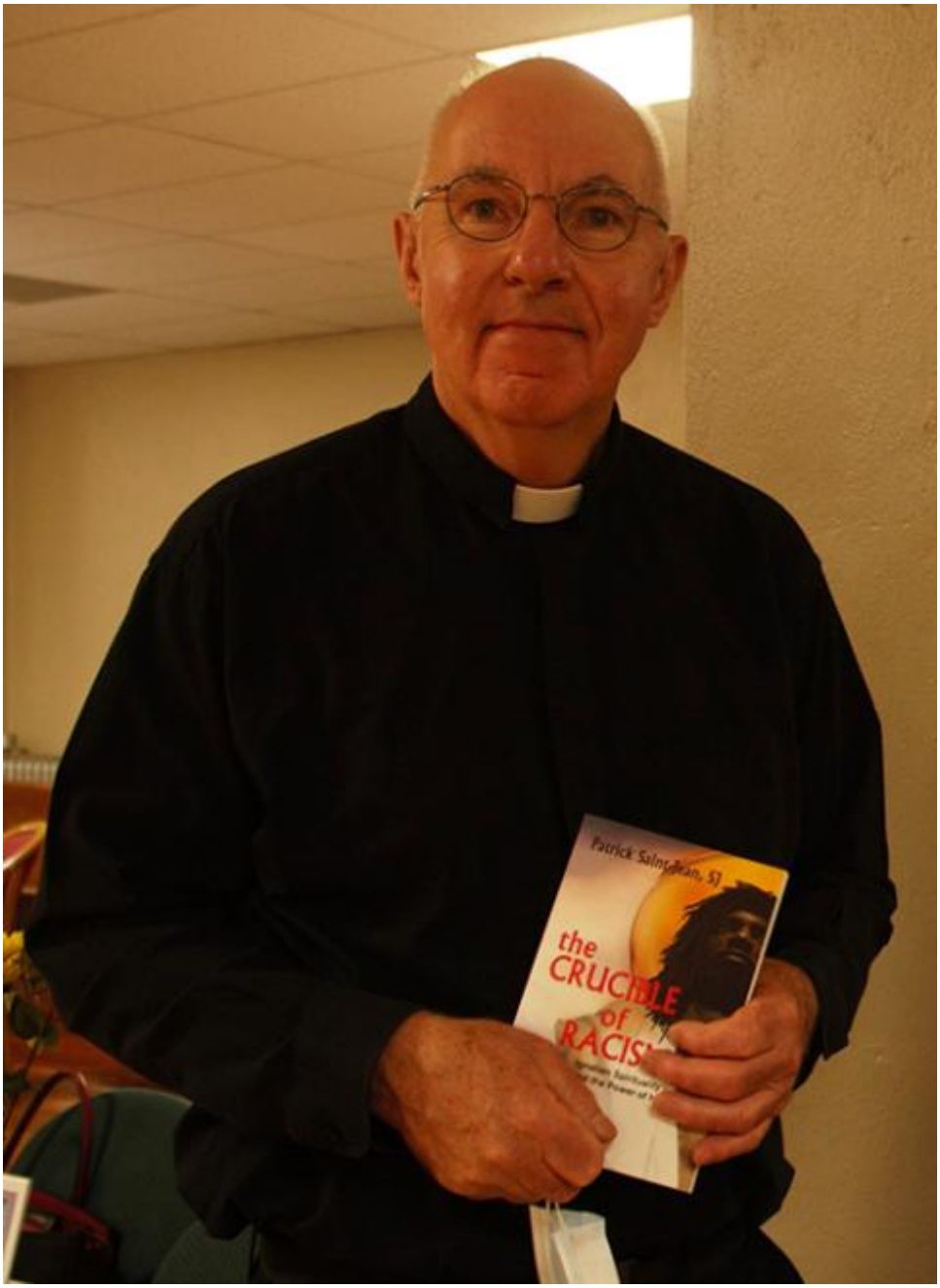
Jesuit Fr. Dirk Dunfee blesses a dog Jennifer Fairweather is holding at St. Ignatius of Loyola Parish's Blessing of the Animals for the St. Francis of Assisi feast day. (Courtesy of Wilfred von Dauster)

In recent NCR interviews, Loyola parishioners and Dunfee looked back on a difficult year of change and transition, which comes in the midst of greater loss as dioceses and religious orders across the country are reshaping ministries to deal with diminishing numbers of clergy.

In a similar example to the Denver parish, the Franciscan Order of Friars Minor announced earlier in the year that they would be transferring authority for an historic mission for Navajo Catholics to the Diocese of Gallup, New Mexico.

Some months after notice of the Jesuit decision in Denver, the archdiocese announced two priests with the Community of St. John religious order would now lead St. Ignatius Loyola.

The parishioners who spoke to NCR repeatedly described their church as a "welcoming" parish with a highly engaged laity. They also stressed the diverse nature of the parish, and its longstanding ties to the wider community.



Jesuit Fr. Dirk Dunfee was pastor of St. Ignatius of Loyola Parish from 2018 to June 30, 2023. (Courtesy of Allan Rowley)

Dunfee, the former pastor, said that Loyola broke with the adage that Sunday morning is "the most segregated time" in America. He described a solid core of Black Catholics who "had held the place together when it was desperately poor and had maintained a spirit of welcome and trusting in God," who had recently been joined by more racially diverse parishioners.

Fairweather said her mother arrived at Loyola after moving to Denver in the middle of the 20th century, and although some parishioners at the time were not welcoming of a new Black Catholic, the pastor then made her "feel very welcome." In the next 30 years, the parish became predominantly Black, and Loyola's court of the Knights of Peter Claver was named after Fairweather's mother.

"We emphasized welcome because Jesus emphasized welcome," Dunfee said, distinguishing Loyola's welcome from a "grudging welcome" that can sometimes exist.

"You're welcome not in spite of who you are, but because of who you are, because you are a gift from God," said Dunfee, who read a message at the beginning of Masses welcoming people of all languages, races, ethnicities, genders and sexual orientations.

Dunfee said he was "astounded" at the impact of that message, seeing parishioners tear up at those words. Throughout Dunfee's tenure, Loyola grew from a parish of about 300 households to about 800 households.

Mary McEnany, who has been attending Loyola since 2005, praised the Jesuit homilies that had "opened the Gospels."

Mary McEnany, a spiritual director for the Ignatian Spirituality Program of Denver, stands at a table at St. Ignatius of Loyola Parish's 2022 Annual Ministry Fair. (Courtesy of Allan Rowley)

"I had a wonderful education, but I never understood my Catholicism until I joined that parish," she said.

For McEnany, becoming an altar server as a "female elder" and engaging with the Spiritual Exercises at Loyola have been deeply meaningful. "I never knew the Catholic Church could be this good," she said.

Dunfee, who entered the Society of Jesus in 1987, said that being pastor at Loyola was the best job he'd ever had.

"I've loved every parish that I've been associated with. This place, Loyola, has captured my heart completely," he said.

Speaking to NCR by phone from the house of his cousin, who is a Lutheran pastor, in Oregon City, Oregon, Dunfee, who had been pastor at Loyola since 2018, reflected on leaving Loyola and shepherding the parish through the year before the Jesuits' official exit on June 30, 2023.

"I'm still right in the middle of this process of grieving and trying to find a way forward, and just feeling a sense of loss and even a sense of emptiness, even as I strive to be in a place of hope and trust in God," Dunfee said.

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Dunfee said that he and parochial vicar Jesuit Fr. Pat Quinn tried to "be with people in their feelings, let them feel whatever they felt, whether it was grief, sadness, or loss, or anger, or a sense, even a sense of having been betrayed, having had the rug pulled out from them."

He said that it wasn't helpful to try to hide his feelings about the transition. "People need to see that it matters," Dunfee said.

"When they see the tears in your eyes and hear you speak of your own struggles, that's where it really becomes powerful and hits home to them that you do love them," he said. "So we grieved together and we were brokenhearted together. And also we struggled to point ourselves in the direction of hope together."

As part of his explanation for withdrawing the Jesuits from St. Ignatius Loyola, Greene wrote, "The province created an apostolic plan in 2020 that calls for reducing the number of Jesuit parishes as one way of dealing with the twin realities of over-extension and smaller numbers [of Jesuits]."

The exterior of St. Ignatius of Loyola Parish in Denver (Courtesy of Wilfred von Dauster)

"This is not an action I take lightly. This decision comes only after many years of discernment and conversations," wrote Greene.

Dunfee remembered that at his first parish assignment at St. Francis Xavier Parish in Kansas City, Missouri, the pastor, Jesuit Fr. Tim McMahon, told him that Jesuit parishes are important because "part of our charge in being in parishes is to make a

home in the church for people who might not otherwise have a home," a phrase that Dunfee said stuck with him for decades afterward.

But even as Dunfee was working through what it would mean to leave parish ministry at Loyola, he said he called the current pastor at St. Francis Xavier to offer his advice and support as Jesuits prepare to leave that parish next July.

"However bloody you think this is going to be, it'll be even bloodier," Dunfee told the pastor.

Dunfee said that one of the many reasons for his heartbreak was his belief in the importance of Jesuit parish ministry.

"I'm so proud of the work that the Society has been able to do over the centuries in our schools and institutions of higher education," said Dunfee, "but as important as that is, it's also kind of an abstraction. Where the abstraction ends is in the parish."

Jennifer Fairweather accompanies the St. Ignatius of Loyola youth choir on keyboard at Easter. Fairweather began to play piano with the Loyola choir when she was about

10 years old. (Courtesy of Jennifer Fairweather)

As Loyola parishioners began to look to the future without Jesuits with trepidation, Dunfee encouraged them to "approach the new pastor and associate with friendship and welcome."

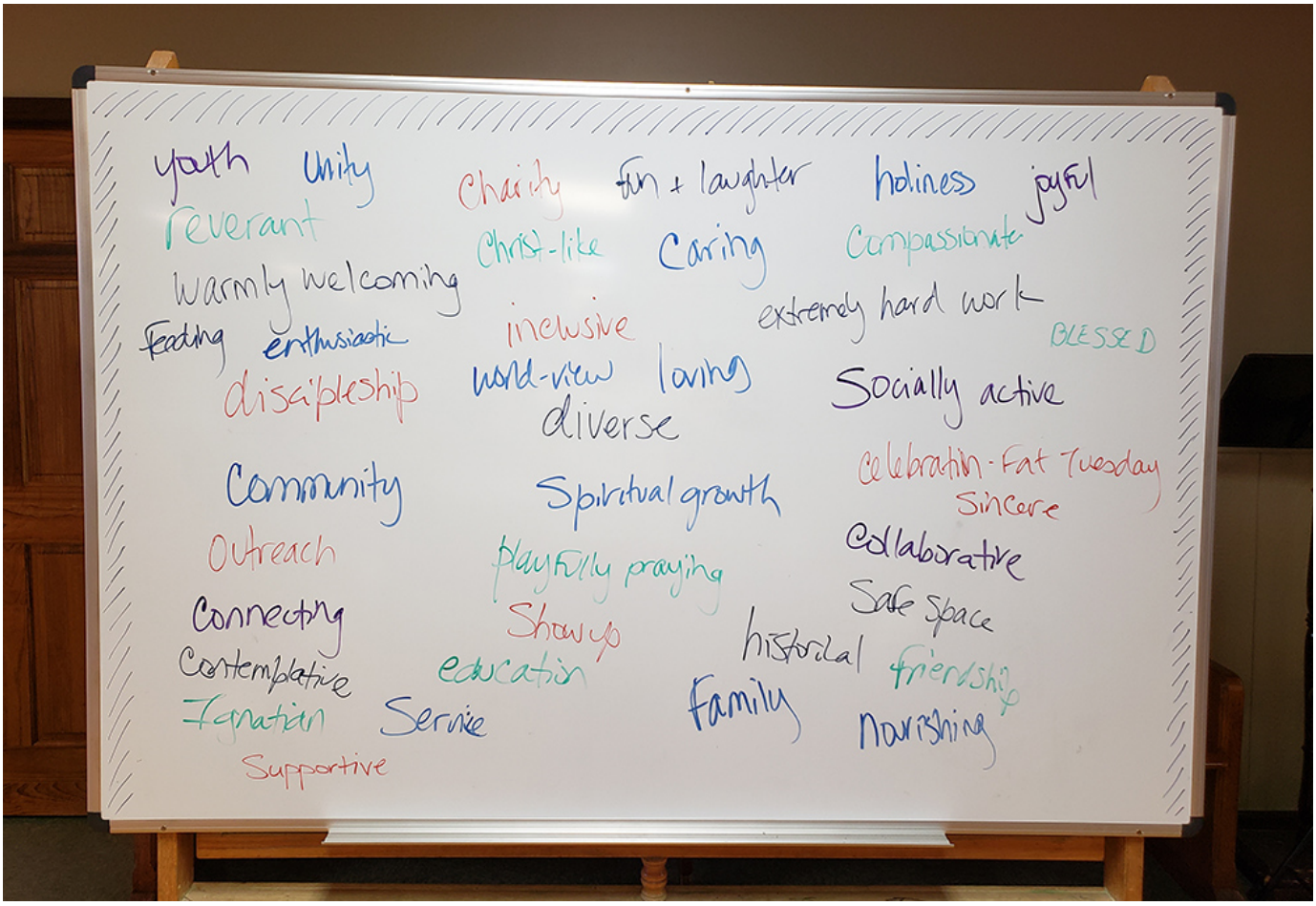
"He's going to make mistakes. I know that because I've made plenty of mistakes," said Dunfee, who will now be helping with the Jesuit community and campus ministry at Regis University.

"Be with him in that as you would want someone to be with you in your mistakes, and speak up. Have a conversation. That's what the Holy Father keeps talking about. It's all in the conversation and the encounter," he said.

Dunfee said that too often lay Catholics have felt that their only option was "to sit here and put up with it" or "to slip out the backdoor."

Instead, Dunfee encouraged parishioners "to stand up and say, 'Look, this is our parish, we're not going anywhere,' " and engage the new pastor in conversation, while acknowledging that the parishioners' empowerment must come from within themselves.

Although some parishioners have left Loyola after the arrival of the new priests from the Community of St. John, McEnany, Fairweather, and others said they are determined to work through the uncomfortable transition.



Attendees of St. Ignatius of Loyola's Ministry Chairs' Retreat answered the question, "Who are we?" on a dry erase board. (Courtesy of Kathy Murzyn)

"We hope our new order can appreciate after they get to know us, that they lucked out," said McEnany.

The new pastor, St. John Fr. Francis Therese Krautter, had been parochial vicar at All Souls Parish in Englewood, south of Denver, where two women said priests denied them Communion because they wore rainbow face masks.

Even though McEnany acknowledged, "I don't know what's going to happen to our gay and transgender and divorced community," she also credited the St. John priests with being "quite aware that for all of us this is a big change."

"These priests are very nice," McEnany said, praising their sense of humor. "I bet they're kind of anxious," she said.

"The parish is not just the pastor and the order. It's the people, and it really is the people of Loyola that make it special," said Fairweather.

"It's our parish, and we want to keep it a welcoming, loving community of people who worship together and help our community and want to make the world a better place," Fairweather said.

A version of this story appeared in the **Sept 15-28, 2023** print issue under the headline: 'Heartbreaking year' as Jesuits leave their last Catholic parish in Colorado.