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Archdiocese investigates claims against Ortega

By Tom Sharpe

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The Rev. Adam Ortega y Ortiz

The Archdiocese of Santa Fe is investigating allegations made by the former music director of the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi against the cathedral’s rector.

Among the allegations, the former music director, Xavier Gonzales, complained in a letter to the archbishop that the rector, the Rev. Adam Lee Ortega y Ortiz, lacked “pastoral sensitivity,” had created a hostile work environment and was prone to “crude and inappropriate” behavior, including

“an inability to keep his hands to himself.”

A story last week on the music director’s complaints about Ortega and Gonzales’ dismissal from his position has drawn online comments and telephone calls indicating a rift had developed within the parish after Ortega became the cathedral’s head priest in June 2012.

Some have said they see Ortega as an important figure in the church and, as rector, the shepherd for the parish. Critics, however — in interviews with *The New Mexican* and in online postings on the newspaper’s website — have complained that he has surrounded himself with young supporters, alienated some parishioners and fired or caused the resignation of several of the cathedral’s staff, leading some members of the congregation to leave for other parishes.

Ortega, 47, became rector of the more than 400-year-old church in Santa Fe after a dozen years as pastor at Santa María del la Paz Catholic Community on the city’s south side. During his first 17 months at the cathedral, more than a dozen employees — about half the cathedral’s staff — were fired or left.

Both Ortega and Gonzales have declined to discuss the matter with the newspaper.

Ortega, however, has begun reaching out to supporters and parishioners on Facebook, asking them to write letters of support for him to Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan and to *The New Mexican*, as well as complain that the newspaper is guilty of “purely reporting lies and mistruths.”

“I need your help at this time,” he said in his Facebook message. “The Archdiocese of Santa Fe, Protection of Children Office has begun its official investigation (which I DO welcome). I am more than confident they will find that I have done my best to always protect, respect and in all Christian charity, love all those entrusted to my care: ESPECIALLY MY YOUTH.”

On Oct. 23, after Ortega fired Gonzales as music director, Gonzales sent out an email to 45 people, whom he addressed as “music ministers and Cathedral family,” suggesting that he was fired because he had objected to Ortega’s behavior in a letter to the archbishop.

“I don’t think it’s necessary to kiss, pat on the stomach, rub a chest, twist a nipple or spank a buttocks to say ‘hi,’ ” Gonzales wrote in his email.

The New Mexican posted an article about Gonzales’ comments on its website Oct. 24 and published the story in its Oct. 25 print edition.

A day after the newspaper story appeared, Ortega announced Gonzales’ departure in the online church bulletin and promised to address the “gossip” at the following Sunday’s services. Churchgoers said he seemed to apologize at the midday Mass on Oct. 27, but said he would avoid rehashing the details for the “tourists” who might be in the audience.

On Oct. 28, the archdiocese’s chancellor, the Rev. John Cannon, issued a written statement that said there had never been previous accusations against Ortega. He pledged that the archdiocese would investigate the “general allegations made by Mr. Gonzales.”

Cannon said Gonzales hand-delivered his letter to the archbishop’s office at the Catholic Center in Albuquerque on the morning of Oct. 23, and that same morning, Ortega handed him a termination letter in front of the archdiocese’s human resources director.

“The Archbishop did not receive the letter until late that afternoon, after Mr. Gonzales’ employment with the Cathedral Basilica had already been terminated,” Cannon wrote. “Mr. Gonzales’ letter to the Archbishop is not the reason his employment with the Cathedral Basilica was terminated. As I stated before, this matter will be dealt with appropriately by the Archdiocese, and not in the public forum.”

In his Facebook message, Ortega defended his record as a priest.

“I fully understand that many are weary of priests who work with youth, but that has been my God given Charism,” he wrote. “I stand behind my 21 years as a priest with my shortcomings and weaknesses doing my best to serve His Catholic Church.”

Ortega solicited letters to Sheehan and other church officials, suggesting the letters tell how people got to know him and what they have observed him do. He also asked for “letters of outrage” to *The New Mexican’s* editorial page.

“Speak about the same things and add about what how [sic] they have entered into ‘unfactual’ information and not doing their due diligence as an investigative newspaper, but how they have entered into the realm of being a vehicle of ‘purely reporting lies and mistruths’ to sell newspapers,” he wrote. “Maybe even consider dropping your subscriptions. I have already done so.”

The Facebook posting was sent to *The New Mexican* by a woman who asked not to be identified, but said she found the solicitation in bad taste.

“I found this invitation to come off as arrogant and desperate,” she wrote. “I am writing this email not in support of one individual or the other, but to inform you, *The New Mexican*, and the community of the extreme measures this priest is taking in order to ‘cover up’ his accusations.”

The Facebook posting isn’t the first time Ortega has reached out to friends and supporters within the church community. Before news of Gonzales’ termination appeared in the paper, he had written a letter under his official letterhead asking recipients to keep the firing confidential.

Contact Tom Sharpe at 986-3080 or tsharp@sfnewmexican.com.