

Principal at Paddling School Vows to Remain in Job

NEW ORLEANS (RNS) The embattled president of the nation's last Catholic school to employ corporal punishment said he plans to remain on the job in spite of a weekend order that abruptly recalled him to Baltimore.

The Rev. John Raphael unexpectedly appeared at a Wednesday (June 8) rally at St. Augustine High School, electrifying hundreds of parents and alumni who support the school's use of paddling as effective discipline.

Earlier this year, Archbishop Gregory Aymond ordered school officials to suspend the use of corporal punishment for at least a year, saying the practice violates the school's Catholic identity.

But for St. Augustine supporters, the dispute with the archdiocese and the Josephite order that runs the school is no longer about paddling, but rather about autonomy and respect for the community's desire to rear children by its norms.

"Nobody's going to tell us how to raise our kids," said Civil District Court Judge Kern Reese, a St. Augustine alumnus and a speaker at the rally.

After he was abruptly dismissed from St. Augustine by the Josephites' superior general, Raphael hadn't spoken publicly. On Wednesday, he launched into a spirited defense of school policy.

The school's mission has long been to steer its African-American students toward productive careers and out of trouble, Raphael told the crowd in the school yard.

"But when the truth gets you into trouble, then that's the right kind of trouble to get into," he said. "We are standing up for who we are."

Troy Henry, the chairman of the school's local board of directors, said the board has the sole power to hire or fire the school president, and considers Raphael to be working under a valid contract.

In a gentle dig at the archbishop, Raphael noted that Aymond had thanked him for his service after his dismissal. So if the archbishop truly values him, Raphael said, "then he'll be glad to have me back."

A fellow Josephite priest, the Rev. Joe Campion, a former St. Augustine chaplain, was fiercely critical of the “ecclesiastical malice” and “abuse of power” within the Josephite leadership that removed Raphael from office.

A generation ago, St. Augustine faculty had to teach its youth to stand against injustice, Campion said, and “the antagonists at that time were both inside and outside the church.”

“In 2011, the antagonists are inside the church,” Campion said.

(Bruce Nolan writes for The Times-Picayune in New Orleans.)