

Our Lady of the Snow's Retreat  
Route 2, Nevis, Minnesota  
56467

Most Rev. Francis J Schenk, D.D.  
Bishop of Duluth  
Chancery Office  
215 W. Fourth St.  
Duluth, Minnesota

Your Excellency,

I am Father Bernard W Bissonnette and I was ordained in  
May of 1958 for the diocese of Norwich, Connecticut.

Since May 1, 1963, I have been in retreat at Via Coeli till  
November 1964. After a three week vacation at home with my folks, Father  
Gerald Fitzgerald sP transferred me to the retreat house in Nevis (Our Lady  
of the Snows) where I have been since November 1964 till the present.

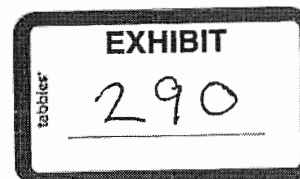
I have both the consent of my bishop and the consent of Fr.  
Gerald sP to look for another diocese. And I am in the hope that you  
might be benevolent in my behalf by allowing me to work in your diocese,  
i.e. that you would grant me an assignment. Towards this goal, I should  
like to request a personal interview. I could drive to Duluth from the  
retreat house.

Hopefully in Christ ,

*Rev. Bernard W. Bissonnette*

Rev. Bernard W Bissonnette

*Handwritten:*  
Name of the person  
(218) 732-4397



June 18, 1965

Dear Father Bissonnette, msc 76

This is your official notice that I am appointing you as an Assistant to Reverend John Dolsina, the Pastor of St. Cecilia's Church at Nashwauk. This appointment becomes effective on June 29.

I am sure that you will find Father Dolsina a very zealous and good pastor. I am also confident that you will do everything you can to be of assistance to him under his direction.

I wish you every happiness with your appointment.

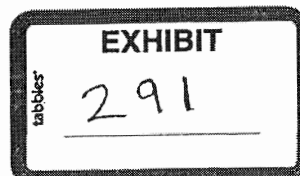
With every kind personal regard and good wish,

I am

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Bishop of Duluth

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CONFIDENTIAL

Fr. Bissonette

Fr. Dolsina's report:  
Everyone in town is talking about Fr. Bissonette and his peculiar behavior.

Fr. Dolsina questions his Faith. Claims he never reads his Office except when hearing confessions on Saturday.

Talks on sex all the time. Uses improper language in talking to students.

Never takes a bath - maybe every three weeks.

Has a strange look in his eyes (others notice it)

Kids avoid him.

All for one kid one week - another the next, etc.

Housekeeper crying over the situation.

Extremely subservient. Never questions a suggestion.

Scolds people in sermon for not making visits to the Bl. Sacrament. Never does himself. No thanksgiving after Mass

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Fr. Bissonette

Fr. Bissonette's reply to Father Dolsina's charges.

Fr. Dolsina never brought these things up until Fr. was leaving. He was surprised that things were not going well.

He claims Father Dolsina's source of information is his housekeeper who is a terrific gossip.

He remembers one kid avoiding him in a store when he was out looking to try to get kids to catechism. The housekeeper nephew refuses to study his lessons, thinking his aunt will intercede for him in the rectory. Some talk might be coming through him.

He gave only two talks on sex. One - the text was brought in to the Chancery (to sophomore, junior, and senior boys) The other was one on modesty to senior girls. He asked a lay teacher to be present and she found nothing objectionable.

He reads his office. If after 2 or 3 days, he is getting nothing out of it, he substitutes for a part of it some spriritual reading. This he does on the advice of a psychologist confessor.

He never remembers scolding the people for not visiting the Bl. Sac. He cannot make a long thanksgiving because when he is in church alone, he gets claustrophobia.

He used the word "bull-shit" once. Another time, when a boy was repeatedly asking to go to the rest room, he ~~XXXXX~~ said "The next time you'll have to pee on the floor."

Fr. Dolsina confined Fr. Bissonette's smoking to his room.

He takes a bath a week.

He said he *Address Plate Service* enjoyed life at the rectory - his "first home". He spoke highly of Fr. Dolsina. *Complete Lettershop Service*

Randolph 2-3166  
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DULUTH 2, MINNESOTA

Fr. Bissonnette:

Joe Saver's oral report (also on the bottom of his letter)

Edr. Van Druten and Joe Saver, although they could not get more than a general impression, have the idea he is a very sick man - possibly paranoid. He is extremely subservient - too much so. He is afraid of the impression the Bishop would have by his going to the Clinic. That is why he wants to talk to the Bishop. If after talking to the Bishop, the Bishop thinks he should go to the Clinic, he would do so willingly. He was almost in panic at the interview.

Nevis's report: adjustment poor - self-sufficient - definite in his views "frequently wrong but never in doubt"

careless in dress. distant with other. Main complaint - attitude of knowing everything.

Norwich Diocese - had trouble with boys (sent out of diocese because a father was threatening arrest.

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DULUTH 2, MINNESOTA

July 31, 1965

Rev. John Dolsina,  
St. Cecilia's Church Rectory,  
Washauk, Minnesota.

Dear Father Dolsina:

I was very much edified by your kind and priestly letter which you sent me. It is quite obvious that this priest needs more help than I thought. I am sorry that you are subjected to this cross. I suppose we have to take it for granted that most of the priests that are sent to Via Coeli or some of its branches or some other institution have some serious defects. It is probable that a part of their difficulty is that they have to a considerable degree lost their priestly sense. It is a very sad matter. I would wish to help. I think that most priests feel the same way about this. But if a problem priest shows no disposition to try to be priestly - all who try to help are relatively helpless. Just how you get such a one to come to his senses - well there is one process that fits all cases.

I am enclosing a copy of the letter that the enclosed envelope addressed to Father Bisceganette contains. This will be the last resort. I am a bit limp after writing it. Please God I shall not have to write another like it.

You may destroy the letter and your copy of it if you wish. If you wish me to write a different kind to be used in an emergency, please let me know. And thank you with all my heart for your concern for an unfortunate priest.

Gratefully yours in Christ,

Bishop of Duluth

EXHIBIT

292

July 31, 1965

Rev. Bernard W. Bissonette,  
St. Cecilia's Church Rectory,  
Nashwauk, Minnesota.

Dear Father Bissonette:

This is a very painful letter to write but in your own interests I must write it.

Recently, Father Dalsina came to talk to me about your conduct. He is not the kind of priest who relishes bringing in complaints about a priest. I think he was almost driven to tears to bring up the matter at all. He is quite aware how important it is that you give a good account of yourself if you are to work in this Diocese.

You have succeeded in bringing a tension into his life that he should not be subjected to. Nor will I ask him to submit to it. If this ensues in a show of resentment or vindictiveness toward him because he came to me - that will terminate your service in this Diocese. Father Dalsina will try to help you. Please accept his priestly concern as quite genuine.

I bring up only some of the examples that cause him concern. Some of them portray a bad lack of consideration for him and for others.

I have been aware of your interest in liturgical music. I encouraged it because I thought that this interest might help to sustain your priestly interests. I must call your attention that you like every other priest or lay musician who has composed anything must submit your copy to the Music Commission of this Diocese before it may be used. So far you have no such approval of the Commission. I understand, however, that you have mimeographed a great amount of music. It has cost quite a bit of money. The implication is that you are going to introduce this in Nashwauk.

Quite some time ago at the recommendation of the Diocesan Music Commission, I suggested that the pastors would purchase for their people the People's Mass Book. I think that most of the pastors, including Father Dalsina, have followed this. In the mind of the Commission this book was the most acceptable. It would take care of matters at least for a year until something much better would come out. I would certainly not recommend your compositions until the Music Commission has passed on it. And I would not impose a new investment in music at this time - especially not in mimeographed sheets messing up the pews.

It comes to this. Your preference will not prevail over the pastor's/ It will be too bad if you try to make an issue of this.

It is also alleged that you used rather questionable language before lay people in describing two of your former pastors. I think that all of us might be mindful of our own shortcomings before we make public, and in an offensive way, the shortcomings of others. There was no need for this.

EXHIBIT

432

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Just what did you hope to accomplish by this? And such things "get around".

Is it true that one morning when you were scheduled to offer the 7:15 Mass you insisted on having coffee at 7:00? If this is true I think it high time that you re-examine the quality of your own priestly sensibilities. Not very edifying to the housekeeper either - or is it?

You ought to be concerned about your priestly attire - or do you think a dirty sweat shirt fosters respect?

I shall not define the length of a thanksgiving after Mass. While you lived in my house I noticed that you came to breakfast almost immediately after Mass. I did not call your attention to this. I should have. A priest ordained seven years should not need such a correction. There were no emergencies here that called for that.

Father Dolsina is a hard working priest. His health is not always good. He needs rest. He usually retires at around 10:00 o'clock. Do you think it is considerate if you keep your TV going when he is trying to get the rest he needs? In my house, which is very large, this would not bother me because I was at such a distance from you. But it is certainly different in a small rectory. Father Dolsina should not be subjected to the rationing of his night's rest by his assistant. A good priest is also a gentleman. He is considerate even though this may curtail to some extent his own preferences.

If you can't see how these things and others can drive a pastor to distraction, you will have to look elsewhere to continue it.

I never anticipated that I would have to write a letter like this to you. It is the first one I have ever written in this vein. I do not enjoy the experience.

I am inclosing this letter in an envelope with a letter I am sending to Father Dolsina. He also has a copy of it. If he gives it to you it will be because his efforts to help you will be unavailing - a kind of desperation in not getting anywhere. It is then time that you read this letter. I hope it may help you in some way. That is all I desire.

I shall keep you in my prayers. Please keep me in yours.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Bishop of Duluth





Bishop's Residence  
2215 East Second Street  
Duluth 12, Minnesota  
January 28, 1966

*Bishop's Memo*

TO ANY CATHOLIC BISHOP WHO MAY BE INTERESTED IN ACCEPTING THE SERVICE OF THE REVEREND BERNARD BISSONNETTE

Your Excellency:

This is to introduce Father Bissonnetto, a priest of the Diocese of Norwich. Because of Father Bissonnetto's conduct, Bishop Hines felt constrained to send him to "Via Cooli" at Jemez Springs, New Mexico. He was later transferred to a branch of "Via Cooli" - "Our Lady of the Snows" at Nevis, Minnesota.

From time to time I have given guest priests of these two institutions a chance to rehabilitate themselves in the Diocese of Duluth. Unfortunately, all of these former ventures turned out quite miserably.

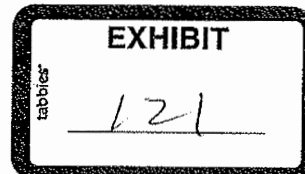
In a relatively small diocese where the "grape vine" is rather effective these instances made pastors rather "gun shy" with regard to further experiments.

Last June I accepted Father Bissonnetto for service in the Diocese of Duluth at Nashwauk, Minnesota. Father Dolsina, the pastor, is a very zealous priest - one of the best pastors in the diocese. It is quite possible that Father Dolsina is too much of a perfectionist to deal with a problem priest.

As you will see from the psychologist's and psychiatrists report, which Father Bissonnetto will present to you in a sealed envelope, there is a rather strange combination of subservience to authority and of resentment toward authority. In talking to Father Bissonnetto I got the impression that he is not aware of his resentments though they reveal themselves in a certain aggressiveness that makes him a bit difficult to deal with. He does not take hints. It has to be "laid on the line".

A very considerable tension developed in Father Dolsina's life. I wrote Father Bissonnetto a rather sharp letter. Thereafter, up to the time I left for the Council I heard no more from Father Dolsina. There was no evidence of the recurrence of the psychosexual problem. But apparently the tension in the pastor increased. While I was at the Council the Vicar General sent Father Bissonnetto to Father Patrick Corbett, the pastor of St. James Church in Duluth. Actually, Father Corbett does not need a second assistant.

There has been very little to do for Father Bissonnetto outside of hearing confessions and offering Masses. When a priest, especially one with a serious problem, is not kept busy, the big problem is apt to reassert itself. So far it has not appeared.



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You will notice that the recommendation of both the psychologist and the psychiatrist is to have Father Bissonnette teach in a High School. The reasons are given.

We have only one Catholic High School in the Diocese of Duluth besides a girls' academy. I conferred with the principal of our Catholic High School about using Father Bissonnette as a teacher. All the faculty assignments are filled. It might be possible to juggle the schedule so that Father Bissonnette could teach Latin. That process, however, would be so artificial that the faculty members would recognize it. Just how this might show in the attitude of the faculty members toward him, I do not know. But there is a risk that might depress Father Bissonnette.

If I send Father Bissonnette to another pastor I fear that Father would begin with two strikes on him. The priests in this Diocese already know that he has had two appointments within seven months.

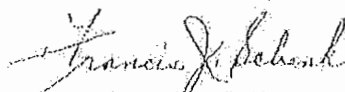
I do think that the gained control of his psychosexual problem is a matter of notable success. Apparently this is not yet a fixed pattern of his life - i.e. the problem. In the past he has had his failures but apparently this is not as yet an overpowering drive in his life with which he cannot cope in reasonably favorable circumstances. This opinion is born out in the report of the psychologist and the psychiatrist.

No evidence has come to my attention that in the past seven months that there is any indication of a relapse in this matter. To me this is an evidence of considerable achievement that I may not overlook.

I would be glad to give Father Bissonnette another appointment but I have nothing to offer him that follows the guidelines of the psychologist and the psychiatrist. I am concerned that Father Bissonnette be given a chance to reestablish himself. I do think this is possible. It is a frightening to abandon a priest who appears to be struggling earnestly, and with some evidence of success, to gain the necessary control over himself.

I shall be grateful for any consideration you can give to my plea.

Sincerely in Christ,

  
Bishop of Duluth