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Diocese: Priests for Life's Fr. Pavone needed in Texas

Dennis Sadowski Catholic News Service | Sep. 14, 2011

Bishop Patrick J. Zurek is seen in a 2009 file photo. (CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)

WASHINGTON -- Fr. Frank Pavone, national director of Priests for Life, remains a priest in good standing in the Diocese of Amarillo, Texas, said Msgr. Harold Waldow, vicar for clergy in the diocese.

Msgr. Waldow told Catholic News Service Sept. 13 that Bishop Patrick J. Zurek only suspended Father Pavone's ministry outside of the diocese because the well-known pro-life priest is needed for work in Amarillo. {C}
Bishop Zurek in a decree Sept. 6 ordered the 52-year-old New York-born priest to return to Amarillo and announced it in a Sept. 9 letter to his fellow bishops. He pointed to "persistent questions and concerns" from clergy and laity about how the millions of dollars donated to Priests for Life are used as the reason for suspending Father Pavone's ministry.

"He's here to be obedient to the bishop and try to work with the bishop," Msgr. Waldow said. "He's going to have assignments, and he will be put on our payroll and given health care and other benefits like any other priest of the diocese."

For his part, Father Pavone said he planned to return to Amarillo the evening of Sept. 13 from Birmingham, Ala., where he had been taping programs for the Eternal Word Television Network for more than a week. He also planned to meet Msgr. Waldow soon after he arrived.

Both Msgr. Waldow and Father Pavone said no meeting was immediately scheduled with Bishop Zurek, who was leaving the diocese the afternoon of Sept. 13 for two weeks.

Father Pavone also told CNS he has already explored the possibility of being incardinated in another diocese so he could resume full-time ministry with Priests for Life as soon as possible.

"I fully expect that my time in Amarillo, both in terms of this immediate trip and in terms of my affiliation with that diocese is going to be temporary," he said.

Father Pavone added that he has appealed the suspension to the Congregation of the Clergy at the Vatican.

In his own letter to the bishops Sept. 12, Father Pavone questioned the reason for the suspension of his ministry outside of Amarillo and said that Bishop Zurek's claim that Priests for Life has operated with no financial transparency was unfounded.

He cited a list of 41 documents detailing the finances of organization provided to Bishop Zurek since 2005, when he was incardinated in the Amarillo Diocese by Bishop John W. Yanta, who served on the organization's board of advisers. Father Pavone said the documents continued to be sent to Bishop Zurek even after Priests for Life closed a small office in Amarillo while the organization studied whether to relocate its headquarters from New York to the Texas panhandle.

No acknowledgement of the documents was ever received, the priest wrote.

"We do not presume any ill will here," Father Pavone wrote. "We may just be dealing with 'cultural' differences. But the result has been frustrating to all of us."

By cultural differences, Father Pavone told CNS he was referring to life in New York versus life in Amarillo and how people respond to receiving information.

He said the same documents provided to Bishop Zurek also have been sent to Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of New York as well as to the 21 prelates who serve on the organization's board of advisers.

Father Pavone also noted that he has never received a salary from Priests for Life nor is he on the payroll of the Amarillo Diocese. He said Priests for Life covers the cost of a small residence -- about $2,000 a month -- and his expenses associated with the ministry, which he called "very small."

Records filed with the Internal Revenue Service show that the organization's income topped $10.8 million in 2008, the latest year tax forms were available. In 2007, Priests for Life showed income of $9.2 million.

The same records show that Father Pavone received no income from the organization during those years.

Bishop Zurek raised questions about the financial dealings of Priests for Life in his letter to the bishops. He said Father Pavone had not adequately explained whether funds were being used "prudently" by Priests for Life.

"Since he has consistently refused to subject the PFL to a transparent and complete auditing of all expenditures, I have reasons to be alarmed at the potential financial scandal that might arise if it were the result of my failure to correct Father Pavone's incorrigible defiance to my legitimate authority as his bishop," Bishop Zurek said in his letter.

Since becoming national director of Priests for Life in 1993, Father Pavone has become one of the country's most visible and outspoken opponents of abortion and advocates of pro-life issues, lecturing widely, leading retreats and prayer services and producing television and radio programs.

He also holds the same position with Gospel of Life Ministries, an interdenominational effort to end abortion, which shares its headquarters with Priests for Life.

In addition, Father Pavone is national pastoral director of both the Silent No More Awareness Campaign and Rachel's Vineyard, an abortion healing ministry. Both are affiliated with Priests for Life. He also is president of the National Pro-Life Religious Council.

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