

## Bishop tries to rein in high-profile pro-life priest

David Gibson Religion News Service | Sep. 26, 2011

Just days after prominent antiabortion activist Fr. Frank Pavone was ordered to suspend his work as head of Priests for Life, Pavone and his bishop, Patrick J. Zurek of Amarillo, Texas, were seeking a way out of the tense standoff.

Pavone told reporters in Amarillo that he was seeking to be "incardinated," or authorized to work, in another diocese, presumably one where he could continue his 18-year role as head of the New York-based Priests for Life.

"I do not foresee myself staying incardinated in Amarillo," Pavone said Sept. 14 before celebrating Mass at St. Mary's Cathedral in Amarillo. "It's a sensitive issue. We're working it out behind the scenes."

At the same time, church officials in Amarillo sought to tone down the harsh rhetoric that Zurek had used in a Sept. 9 letter to U.S. bishops in which he referred to questions about the group's finances, and said Pavone's work has "inflated his ego with a sense of self-importance."

Msgr. Harold Waldow, the diocese's vicar for clergy and Zurek's point man in negotiations with Pavone, sent a letter to Priests for Life Sept. 15 clarifying that Pavone remains "a priest in good standing." The bishop's suspension order, he said, "does not mean that Fr. Pavone is being charged with any malfeasance or being accused of any wrongdoing."

The order does prevent Pavone from engaging in ministry outside the Amarillo diocese.

"I must say every time I've had conversations with Father Frank and asked him to do whatever the bishop might be requiring ... he's always been very positive in his response," Waldow told the Amarillo Globe-News Sept. 13.

He added that Pavone and Zurek "are both very strong personalities."

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.

"My decision is the result of deep concerns regarding his stewardship of the finances of the Priests for Life organization," Zurek wrote. Priests for Life "has become a business that is quite lucrative which provides Fr. Pavone with financial independence from all legitimate ecclesiastical oversight," the bishop said.

Zurek said "persistent questions and concerns" from clergy and laity about how the "millions of dollars in donations" the organization has received are being spent led to the action.

The bishop also asked Pavone to return to Amarillo "to spend time in prayer and reflection."

Waldow noted that many other bishops support Zurek and share his concerns about Pavone's largely independent oversight of Priests for Life's annual \$10 million budget.

"He's here to be obedient to the bishop and try to work with the bishop," 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."

But Pavone has a loyal and influential following in the hierarchy as well, and his international standing as an antiabortion crusader has brought him popular renown and devotion.

The Center for Bio-Ethical Reform, an antiabortion group known for displaying graphic signs at demonstrations, announced it would picket parishes in Amarillo in a "Free Father Frank!" campaign to release Pavone "from what amounts from ecclesiastical "house arrest," " as Gregg Cunningham, the group's executive director, put it.

"A global battle is raging within Catholicism between clerics who believe the church should do more to fight abortion and those who believe the church should do less," he said. "With Bishop Zurek's confused and confusing decision to sideline Fr. Pavone's pro-life ministry, the fault line in this divisive dispute now runs directly through the center of Amarillo."

Pavone told Catholic News Agency that he would consider starting a religious order or society -- something akin to the Franciscans, Jesuits or the lay movement Opus Dei -- if he could not find a bishop willing to back his full-time antiabortion advocacy.

Three years ago, Pavone abandoned plans to establish a Priests for Life affiliate, Missionaries of the Gospel of Life, as a church-recognized society of apostolic life that would accept and ordain its own seminarians.

The Missionaries of the Gospel of Life broke ground in August 2006 for a new house of formation and international headquarters in Amarillo, but those plans were abandoned in 2008.

Pavone sent a private message to supporters Sept. 16 thanking them for their support, adding that he was not discouraged as he continues fighting abortion from his home in Amarillo.

"I'm here because cooperating with church authority at this moment is the best way to preserve the mission I lead to save these children, a mission aimed precisely at increasing the church's awareness of and response to this holocaust."

Since taking charge of Priests for Life, Pavone has led something of a nomadic existence. He initially moved the organization's headquarters from California to New York, where he was ordained a priest in 1988 by the late Cardinal John O'Connor.

Pavone reportedly had a falling out with O'Connor's successor, Cardinal Edward Egan, and in 2005 he put himself under the jurisdiction of the Amarillo diocese, and moved some Priests for Life operations there.

Priests for Life's offices are now based in Staten Island, N.Y., but Pavone remains a priest of the Amarillo diocese.

[Catholic News Service contributed to this report.]

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