NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Vatican sides with Pavone, but details unclear

Tom Gallagher | Jun. 27, 2012 NCR Today

According to the *Amarillo Globe-News* [1]:

> A Roman Catholic priest restricted to ministry within the Diocese of Amarillo appears to have won a loosening of the restraints placed on him by his bishop.

The Congregation of the Clergy at the Vatican has overturned Amarillo Bishop Patrick J. Zurek's decision to prevent the Rev. Frank Pavone from performing religious services outside the Roman Catholic Diocese of Amarillo, according to information from both sides in the dispute.

But a statement from Zurek said Pavone still must continue "until further notice" his ministry as chaplain of the Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ at Prayer Town, near Channing, and the two must agree, in advance, about Pavone's participation in pro-life events.

Pavone has been operating since September under restrictions placed upon him by Zurek, who raised questions about the finances of Priests for Life, a New York anti-abortion nonprofit, and affiliated organizations directed by Pavone.

The activist priest placed himself under the authority of the Amarillo diocese in 2005 because he was promised by now-retired Bishop John W. Yanta that he would be able to pursue full-time pro-life ministry, which he could not do as a clergyman at the Archdiocese of New York. Pavone's plans to build a $130-million pro-life seminary in Amarillo fizzled.

Priests for Life raised $45.5 million from 2004 to 2008, according to its tax returns. Priests for Life finished 2010 with a revenue shortfall of $1.4 million, according to an independent audit the organization posted on its website.

Pavone has said Priests for Life has provided all records requested by the bishop, as have affiliates Rachel's Vineyard Ministries and Gospel of Life Ministries.

Zurek suggested in a Sept. 9, 2011, letter to U.S. bishops, that Catholics refrain from donating to Pavone's charities until questions are settled about the organization's handling of charitable donations.

Priests for Life announced the appeal ruling on its website as an affirmation that Pavone "remains a priest in good standing all over the world."

"We were confident all along that a just decision would be made by the Vatican's Congregation for the

Clergy," the website said. "While we fully agree that Bishop Zurek has rightful authority over the priests of his diocese, we also see the urgent need for Father Pavone to be allowed to conduct his priestly ministry outside the diocese of Amarillo for the good of the pro-life movement."

Zurek's statement indicates some restrictions still apply.

"As a gesture of good will, I will grant permission to him in individual cases, based upon their merits, to participate in pro-life events with the provision that he and I must be in agreement beforehand as to his role and function," Zurek wrote.

The statements from Priests for Life and Zurek don't seem to make clear the actual outcome of the appeal, said Thomas Moran, a Canon lawyer and adjunct professor of Canon Law at Case Western Reserve University at Cleveland, Ohio.

"On the one hand, (Priests for Life's) statement says, 'Hey, he's back." On the other hand, the bishop's statement says, 'No, he's still going to be chaplain here.

"That sounds a lot different to me than 'I'm back' does. But the only way you can resolve that is to see the decree (from the Congregation of the Clergy) itself."

Priests for Life spokesman Jerry Horn confirmed the organization's statement but said the nonprofit has no documents "that we would be allowed to give."

Zurek did not immediately return a call for comment, nor did Pavone, who is at a National Right to Life Convention at Washington, D.C., according to Horn.

"We have the highest respect for the bishop and Father Frank continues to have discussions with him regarding his (Pavone's) call to minister to the unborn," Horn said. "These discussions have been very cordial and amiable.

"Because those discussions are ongoing, we really can't say anything other than what we have said in our public statement at this time."

Sister Mary M. Walsh, director of media relations for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, referred questions to Zurek. The conference would make no comment regarding the case or Zurek's assertion that Catholics withhold donations from Priests for Life and other nonprofits led by Pavone.

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