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Pastor, youth ministers resign in wake of New Jersey scandal

by Brian Roewe

Although Fr. Michael Fugee resigned from active ministry Thursday, the fallout from his purported violations of a court agreement barring contact with children continued through the weekend, with the resignations of a pastor and two youth ministers from a parish where he had ministered.

The announcement of the resignations came during weekend Masses at St. Mary's Church in Colts Neck, N.J., where two letters were read, one from Trenton Bishop David O'Connell and one from now-former pastor Fr. Thomas Triggs.

Fugee, a priest of the Newark archdiocese, had volunteered in recent years at Triggs' parish, which is in the Trenton diocese.

O'Connell announced Saturday he accepted Triggs' resignation, which became effective immediately; the priest would take a sabbatical before receiving a new assignment.

"The troubling events of the past week and the unrelenting scrutiny that have surrounded them in the media and within your parish have made it clear to me that a change in parish leadership is in the best interest of all concerned," O'Connell wrote in the weekend letter to parishioners.

"There are few things in life as important as protecting our children and young people. We all must recommit ourselves to that goal by supporting the policies of the Diocese of Trenton designed to do precisely that," he wrote.

In a separate email to Trenton priests, O'Connell said the diocese did not know Fugee was present because a letter of suitability was never sought. He called the oversight "a terrible lapse of judgment on the part of

those who extended the invitation."

In his letter, Triggs expressed thanks to his parish community of six years. He also announced he had accepted the resignations of the two youth ministers -- Amy and Mike Lenehan -- who had asked Fugee, a close friend, to occasionally assist with retreats and other activities. While acknowledging the controversy, the pastor offered no apology in his letter.

"The controversy that has arisen during the past week, discussed at the parish forum on Friday night, has made it clear to me that the good of our parish can only be served if I step down as pastor," Triggs wrote.

The Friday meeting had Triggs, the Lenehans and several parish deacons answering questions from a concerned St. Mary's Parish community.

Although the meeting was closed to the press, Grace Collins, a parishioner in attendance, told *NCR* that each gave a brief statement before opening the floor to questions about how a priest convicted of groping a 14-year-old boy was allowed to associate with the parish's children.

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In 2003, a jury convicted Fugee of aggravated criminal sexual assault, and he received a sentence of five years' probation. Three years later, an appeals court overturned that ruling, saying parts of the priest's 2001 deposition unrelated to his confession should not have been revealed to jurors.

Rather than retry Fugee, the Bergen County prosecutor's office drafted a memorandum of understanding, restricting him from "any unsupervised contact with or to supervise or minister to any child/minor under the age of 18 or work in any position in which children are involved." Fugee and the Bergen County prosecutor signed the document in July 2007, as did the priest's lawyer and the Newark archdiocesan vicar general, Msgr. John Doran.

At the St. Mary's meeting, Triggs and the Lenehans reiterated the position that they had no knowledge of ministerial restrictions regarding Fugee. The Lenehans described him as "cleared of charges" and said they felt betrayed when they saw news reports, first in the Newark *Star-Ledger*, last week.

In his brief comments, Triggs stated he first learned of Fugee's restrictions from the recent media coverage and said the parish was reviewing procedures. Deacon Vincent Renaldi told parishioners he would lead the parish in those efforts as its child safety coordinator, and he and a committee will implement new safeguards to its child protection procedures, including requiring fingerprinting, background checks and nametags to be worn when around children.

When it came their turn to talk, the parish community appeared divided in their opinion, Collins told *NCR*. Some voiced their support of the Lenehans, including members of the parish's youth group, and called the Fugee fallout a "witch hunt"; others questioned why a letter of suitability -- a requirement since 1995 -- was never sought for Fugee and called for the resignations that came the following day.

Earlier Friday, the Newark archdiocese released a statement officially announcing Fugee's decision to leave public ministry on his own terms.

Saying his decision was "for the good of the Church and for my peace," Fugee made clear in his letter Thursday to Newark Archbishop John J. Myers that his activities with St. Mary's and other parishes occurred outside his assigned archdiocesan ministry and without its leadership's knowledge or permission.

"My failure to request the required permissions to engage in those ministry activities is my fault, my fault alone. I am sorry that my actions have caused pain to my Church and to her people," he wrote to Myers.

The archdiocese clarified the terms of his removal: Fugee cannot present himself as a priest, cannot wear clerical clothing and cannot perform publicly any duties of a priest.

Friday's press release from the archdiocese was an about-face on the issue. Earlier, Newark communications director James Goodness told the *Star-Ledger* that Fugee had done nothing wrong. Friday's press release confirmed that the activities with St. Mary's and other parishes fell outside the duties of his official assignment, and the archdiocese would not have granted him permission had he first disclosed them.

The archdiocese said it restricted his ministry to the archdiocesan center, where he was under continual supervision. But they also confessed to learning of his extracurricular ministries in mid-April, and only after a reporter approached them.

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