News



(NCR screenshot/Paulist Fathers)



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The second-in-command of an historic community of U.S. Catholic priests that operates popular ministries across the country has resigned after he confirmed a woman's report in early August that he made an unwelcome sexual advance toward her.

Fr. Frank Desiderio, vice president of the Paulist Fathers, corroborated the woman's description of the incident to Paulist President Fr. René Constanza, whom the victim contacted on Aug. 10. The victim told Constanza that the sexual misconduct, which included inappropriate touching, had occurred a few days prior.

Desiderio —- a former parish priest, campus minister and seminary rector — has also been suspended from priestly ministry.

In a letter Constanza wrote to the Paulist communities where Desiderio served, which NCR obtained, Constanza said Desiderio "expressed his great remorse at his lapse in judgment."

"Fr. Frank profoundly regrets the harm he has caused the victim as well as the effects this may have on the Paulist Fathers and the people we serve," Constanza wrote.

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The Paulist Fathers did not release any further details on the incident, citing the victim's request for anonymity. Constanza said he met with the woman in person, and with someone else present, and added that it was "heart wrenching to hear the traumatic effects the words and actions of a priest can have on someone."

Paul Snatchko, a spokesman for the Paulist Fathers, told NCR that Desiderio was suspended immediately after he confirmed the woman's report. Snatchko said Desiderio will be attending a treatment facility that helps priests and religious with mental and behavioral health issues.

"It's certainly a sad and unfortunate situation for everybody involved," said Snatchko, who added that the Paulist Fathers also contacted the Archdiocese of New York and the Diocese of Albany to inform officials in those jurisdictions of Desiderio's suspension from ministry.

Desiderio, who became the Paulist Fathers' vice president in June 2022, most recently resided at the Paulist "Motherhouse" in New York City. At the time of his suspension, he was also director of St. Mary of the Lake, the Paulist summer retreat in Lake George, New York. The Paulist Fathers also removed him from that position.

"Let me assure you that the steps that have been taken, including Fr. Frank's resignation as vice president, were necessary and in the best interests of the victim, the Paulist Fathers, and all those impacted by these events," Constanza wrote.

Attempts to reach Desiderio by email and telephone for this story were unsuccessful.

Ordained in 1982, Desiderio has held several notable positions as a Paulist priest. He has served as the community's director of formation and president of Paulist Productions, a role in which he produced movies and documentaries. From 2014 to 2022, he was the first consultor, or chief adviser, to the president of the Paulist Fathers.

Desiderio was also previously director of campus ministry at the UCLA University Catholic Center, rector of St. Paul's College, and a preaching and pastor communications professor at the Catholic University of America and Washington Theological Union. He has authored books on spirituality and written poetry, and was still posting spiritual reflections and poems on his Facebook page as recently as Aug. 19.

For four years, Desiderio also served as director of the Paulist Center in Boston, which will hold a listening session after its 10 a.m. Mass on Aug. 27 for members of that community, according to an email that Constanza sent to the Paulist Center. Constanza said a retired state judge will facilitate the listening session.

"As president, I ask your forgiveness for the pain suffered by survivors of clerical misconduct by any member of our Paulist Fathers community," said Constanza, who also wrote in his letter that the Paulists have enlisted "the outside consultation and expertise of lay professionals who deal with cases of abuse."

Constanza also said that the Paulist Fathers were notifying their communities about Desiderio's suspension, in part to invite other potential victims to come forward. Snatchko, the Paulists' spokesman, said there had not been other reports of misconduct against Desiderio as of Aug. 24.

A version of this story appeared in the **Sept 15-28, 2023** print issue under the headline: Paulist Fathers' VP resigns after acknowledging inappropriate sexual

conduct with woman.