

Priest suspended following photos with woman

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Father Cutie (CNS photo)

MIAMI

The Miami priest suspended from his parish and Catholic radio posts after photos of him with a woman on the beach were released by a tabloid magazine said he has had a romantic relationship with the woman for about two years and is in love with her.

Father Alberto Cutie, who had been administrator of St. Francis de Sales Parish in Miami Beach and general director and president of Pax Catholic Communications, spoke about the unnamed woman in a May 11 interview with "The Early Show" on CBS television.

The photos of the Cuban-American priest -- dubbed "Father Oprah" because of the advice he gives to couples on Spanish radio and television -- were published in the Spanish-language magazine TVNotas May 5.

Father Cutie opened the "Early Show" interview with apologies to the Catholic community, Miami Archbishop John C. Favalora and his fellow priests for his actions, which he called "imprudent" and "stupid."

"I don't support the breaking of the celibacy promise," he said. "I understand fully that this is wrong."

Father Cutie said he was in the process of deciding whether to break up with the woman and recommit to his celibacy vow or to commit to the woman, perhaps leading to marriage.

"I need to pray and I need to think about things," he said, adding that "I feel in my heart that maybe (marriage to the woman) is what God wants."

Father Cutie said that although he supports celibacy he believes that "maybe it should be optional."

"I do believe that people should be given the option to marry or not to marry in order to serve God," he added. "But the church, see, has tradition and practices that are part of wanting to do what is right. I think we all have ideals, and we have ways of living, and we want to do things right. But the truth is, sometimes we fall short. And I fell short."

In a statement shortly after the photos were published, Archbishop Favalora said he was "deeply saddened by the news" and apologized "on behalf of the church in Miami" to the parishioners of St. Francis de Sales, "to the listeners and supporters of Radio Paz and Radio Peace and to the entire archdiocese."

Archdiocesan spokeswoman Mary Ross Agosta said in a statement on the archdiocesan Web site that Father Cutie is "no longer in charge of Pax Catholic Communications or St. Francis de Sales Parish." But she added that he is "a great priest whose ministry has consoled, comforted and celebrated with thousands of people. Now is the time to ask those people to pray for him."

Pax Catholic Communications consists of the Miami archdiocesan Spanish and English radio stations and La Voz Catolica, Miami's archdiocesan Spanish-language newspaper.

In a personal apology on his Web site -- www.padrealberto.net -- Father Cutie asked for forgiveness from those "who may be hurt or saddened by my actions."

He said that since he entered the seminary at age 18 the priesthood has brought him great joy.

"The commitment that I made to serve God will remain intact," he said, adding that he was grateful for the love and support he has received from the local community, parishioners and radio listeners "who have demonstrated great compassion and understanding toward me as a human being."

"I ask for your continued prayers and support," he added.

After morning Mass May 7, about 60 St. Francis de Sales parishioners gathered outside the church to rally in support of Father Cutie, waving signs and chanting.

A parishioner who organized the rally told The Miami Herald, daily newspaper, that the rally was meant to show friendship and support for the work Father Cutie "has done in Miami and all around the world."

Father Cutie, whose name is pronounced koo-tee-AY, was born in Puerto Rico to Cuban parents and grew up in Miami. He was ordained in 1995; four years later he developed an international following with his television show, "Padre Alberto," which was first broadcast on Telemundo.

He has appeared on Spanish radio programs including the Miami archdiocesan radio station Radio Paz. The priest has also written newspaper advice columns and the 2006 self-help book, "Real Life, Real Love."

In a 2002 interview with The Florida Catholic, Miami's archdiocesan newspaper, Cardinal Nicolas de Jesus Lopez Rodriguez of Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, praised Father Cutie's weekly television program on TeleVida, the Dominican Republic's Catholic television network.

The program, "Padre Alberto y Sus Amigos" (Father Alberto and Friends) featured Father Cutie with a studio audience composed mainly of young people discussing topical issues with panels of psychologists and other experts.

"'Padre Alberto y Sus Amigos' has a vast audience among young people," Cardinal Lopez said. "And I am sure many adults watch it as well, because he has the courage to discuss topics that are controversial. He is not afraid."

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