

Priest-founder of Life Teen youth ministry laicized

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Dale Fushek circa 2004 (file photo)

PHOENIX -- A former Mesa pastor has been officially dismissed from the priesthood, officials for the Diocese of Phoenix announced Feb. 16.

Dale Fushek was recently notified he has been laicized. The Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had been investigating the former pastor of St. Timothy Parish in Mesa and one-time vicar general for the diocese for alleged sexual abuse of minors. The Vatican's findings in that investigation resulted in his removal from the priesthood.

Fushek gained prominence throughout the 1980s and 1990s for co-founding Life Teen, an international youth ministry program.

Pope Benedict XVI ordered his dismissal from the priesthood, according to a diocesan statement. Fushek is no longer bound to the duties and obligations he incurred upon his priestly ordination in 1978, and he no longer has the rights of a cleric under church law. As a result, Fushek can no longer refer to himself as "reverend," "monsignor" or "father."

Phoenix Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted received the "decree of dismissal" in January from the Vatican congregation notifying him that Fushek's laicization was the penalty for sexual abuse of minors.

The congregation is responsible for addressing "sexual sins" perpetrated by priests and deacons against minors, according to church law.

Fushek, 57, currently faces charges on several misdemeanor counts of sexual misconduct said to have occurred between 1983 and 1984. The congregation's findings relate only to Fushek's status as a priest and have no bearing on any criminal or civil case.

The former priest faces separate trials on charges of contributing to the delinquency of a minor and on one count of indecent exposure. A trial date has been set for April 30.

"The Catholic Church is very concerned about the welfare and spiritual health of the alleged victims of sexual

abuse by clergy," said Father Chris Fraser, judicial vicar for the Phoenix Diocese.

The investigation by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was initiated a few years ago, according to Father Fraser. The diocese cooperated with its investigation once the allegations were found to be credible.

Fushek was made aware of the investigation and his right to defend himself. He also was invited to have canonical counsel. But in a Feb. 16 statement, he said he chose not to participate or defend himself in the process and that he is at peace and free to pursue God's will.

He was excommunicated from the church in 2008 for his continued involvement with a small, Mesa-based faith assembly called the Praise and Worship Center. As a result he was forbidden from receiving the Eucharist, celebrating Mass or participating in other sacraments.

He also was barred from representing himself as a priest. Despite his dismissal from the clerical state, the penalty of excommunication remains in place, according to diocesan officials.

"There is no doubt that the church has been scandalized by the abuse of minors by Catholic clergy," Father Fraser said. "What makes this case unique is that there is an additional scandal related to the schismatic activities of the Praise and Worship Center.

"Consequently, those who support and promote Fushek's public ministry must be mindful of the spiritual danger and grave harm their actions create by supporting and attending his services," he said.

Bishop Olmsted suspended Fushek's priestly faculties in late 2004 after an allegation was made that Fushek engaged in inappropriate behavior in the presence of a minor at the Mesa parish in 1985. Fushek resigned as pastor in June 2005.

In the diocese's Feb. 16 statement, Bishop Olmsted expressed his concern for Catholics who may be misled or confused by the continuing actions of Fushek, particularly as they relate to the Praise and Worship Center.

Diocesan officials reminded Catholics that any ceremonies -- baptisms, weddings, confessions or the anointing of the sick -- performed by Fushek or others at the Praise and Worship Center are not legitimate sacraments for Catholics and would not be recognized by the Catholic Church.

The bishop asked the diocese's Catholics to pray for reconciliation and healing in this situation.

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