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Pro-life priest seeks mediation with Texas bishop

by Dennis Sadowski by Catholic News Service



Father Frank Pavone, one of the country's most visible and vocal opponents of abortion, has been suspended from active ministry outside the Diocese of Amarillo, Texas, over financial questions about the priest's operation of Priests for Life. The suspension was made public in a Sept. 13 letter by Amarillo Bishop Patrick J. Zurek. (CNS photo/Bob Roller)

WASHINGTON -- Saying that communication has broken down between Bishop Patrick J. Zurek of Amarillo, Texas, and himself, pro-life activist Father Frank Pavone is seeking mediation to resolve differences stemming from questions over the financial operations of Priests for Life.

"The communication and the trust has deteriorated so much," Father Pavone told Catholic News Service Oct. 18. "Obviously, the first normal response that anyone should and would have is let's talk. ... The power of dialogue is very strong in the church and in the Gospel.

"But this is the case where there has been a very consistent and persistent pattern of distorted and selective communication," said Father Pavone, national director of Priests for Life. "After a while one has

to say this just isn't working. That's why the natural conclusion is we need a mediator."

Father Pavone's comments came five days after he decided not to attend an Oct. 13 meeting called by Bishop Zurek. The priest said he declined to meet with the bishop on advice of his canon lawyer, Father David L. Deibel.

The bishop told the Amarillo Globe-News daily newspaper Oct. 13 that he welcomed a face-to-face meeting with the priest. "I am still waiting for a favorable response to that," he said.

Several phone calls from CNS to the Amarillo Diocese seeking comment were not returned.

Although Father Pavone remains in good standing in the Amarillo Diocese, Bishop Zurek suspended him in September from ministry outside the diocese, saying he was needed for work in Texas.

In a statement posted on the Priests for Life website, Father Pavone's canon lawyer said: "The details and history of the present situation are such that moving forward to a resolution is no longer simply a matter of getting together and talking.

"Several church officials have made it clear that they believe mediation is necessary, and that they are willing to undertake a role as mediators," Father Deibel wrote. "Unfortunately, Bishop Zurek has not responded to or even acknowledged any of these requests."



Bishop Zurek announced the meeting with Father Pavone in an

Oct. 6 statement posted on the Amarillo Diocese's website. The statement explained that the meeting was called to seek "clarifications and answers to concerns about the administration of the PFL (Priests for Life) organization and other related entities of which Father Pavone has a leadership role."

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Father Pavone told CNS he had sent a request for mediation to Bishop Zurek prior to Oct. 6, but has received no response.

"In a sense the attempt at a solution reveals the very nature of the problem," Father Pavone said. "It all revolves around this communication that ends up not being communication. We had already made it clear that we were at a dead end and we wanted mediation and we wanted it quickly.

"We are respectfully waiting for some answer as to his readiness to proceed with some mediation," Father Pavone added.

The disagreement between Bishop Zurek and Father Pavone became public in a Sept. 9 letter from the bishop to his fellow bishops across the country. Bishop Zurek said there were lingering questions about

the finances of Priests for Life and affiliated organizations.

The letter announced Father Pavone's suspension from active ministry outside the Amarillo Diocese but did not accuse the priest of financial impropriety.

One of the country's most visible and vocal opponents of abortion, Father Pavone continues to celebrate Mass, hear confessions and minister in other ways, primarily to the Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, a religious order in Prayer Town, Texas, northwest of Amarillo.

Bishop Zurek has said questions remain over the audits of two of Priests for Life's affiliated agencies -- Rachel's Vineyard, an abortion healing ministry, and Missionaries of the Gospel of Life, a lay Catholic association. The questions led him to prohibit Father Pavone from traveling to Priest for Life headquarters on Staten Island in New York and throughout the country to speak about pro-life topics.

Despite the ban, Father Pavone continues to post messages on the Priests for Life website and his Facebook and Twitter accounts as well as videos on the Internet from his Texas location. He said he has not left the diocese in obedience to Bishop Zurek.

Father Pavone was incardinated in the Amarillo Diocese in 2005 by Bishop John W. Yanta, then head of the diocese, who served on the organization's board of advisers.

A financial audit for 2010 posted on the Priests for Life website showed the organization operated with a \$1.4 million deficit.

Since the information became public, Priests for Life has expanded its fundraising efforts, utilizing testimonials from at least one bishop and other supporters.

Father Pavone has appealed his suspension to the Vatican's Congregation of the Clergy.

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