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Priests for Life in \$608,000 debt, faces financial peril

by Tom Gallagher

NCR Today

In another urgent fundraising letter dated February 2012, Priests for Life is seeking \$608,000 "in the next two weeks in to pay bills that are now over 90 days old."

Fr. Frank Pavone, the embattled national director of Priests for Life, states that the "financial problem we're facing is the combination of two things, really; neither of which we had any control over."

In this missive, Pavone drops from his letterhead the role of national director of the Gospel of Life Ministries.

The two outside factors that have put Priests for Life in this critical situation are the economy and donors renegeing on paying their pledges, he writes.

As for the economy, Pavone plays dithering economist and says the economy has been "in a rut for three years now. And I have no idea when it's going to get back on track. But the continued high unemployment and low consumer confidence is wreaking havoc with families ... including our Priest for Life family. A fairly large percentage of your fellow Priests for Life supporters have been forced to cut back on their gifts to us for the simple reason that they are having a tough time making ends meet in their own families."

By the end of 2011, more than \$600,000 in promised gifts never arrived.

Ironically, Pavone claims he was actually acting "prudently" in spending more than \$600,000 on the basis of prior donations materializing at the end of the year. "Instead our bills kept mounting and mounting."

In a surprise move, Priests for Life "even trimmed our staff a bit and cut back on several projects and mission trips." No details were provided. In prior fundraising letters, Pavone wrote with bravado that he

was not going to make any cuts in staff or the budget, as everything was full-steam-ahead.

Now Priests for Life print vendors are no longer doing business with the organization because of non-payment of past invoices.

Not surprisingly, Pavone never accepts some or all of the responsibility for the desperate situation in which Priests for Life finds itself. Pavone never suggests that his dysfunctional behavior and relationship with his own bishop, Patrick Zurek of the Amarillo, Texas, diocese, in which Pavone is seeking an intervention by the Vatican, might be to blame for scaring off donors.

In Pavone's world, the blame is always placed on someone else. Of course, Pavone rolls out the devil as the cause for Priests for Life's financial problems.

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Zurek seems prescient when he voiced deep concerns about Pavone's management and governance of Priests for Life many months ago.

A way forward for Priests for Life

The U.S. bishops' conference ought to step in and take over Priests for Life, reconstitute the board and have Priests for Life's work coordinated with the Office of Pro-Life Activities. The bishops' Pro-Life Committee could serve as at the new board of directors. The U.S. bishops could create an organization similar to Catholic Relief Services, where it controls the organization through the board of directors. The various priests associated with Priests for Life could be called home by their bishops or provincials and Pavone's existing, self-appointed board could pass a resolution appointing a new slate of directors, which would be controlled by the U.S. bishops' conference.

The newly created board could pass new board resolutions changing the by-laws in a way that the U.S. bishops' conference would control the entity on a going forward basis. At this point, the Knights of Columbus would make a sizable donation to wipe out the debts of Priests for Life and/or make a multi-year donation commitment to Priests for Life. All of this would capitalize on the work done to date by Priests for Life and eliminate the instability that Pavone brings to the equation. A professional staff could be hired to run the organization and enable it to become a mainstream Catholic organization.

What to do with Pavone?

It's hard to imagine that Pavone will receive from the Vatican a "get out of jail" card that would allow him to be largely free from the Amarillo diocese and Zurek. As part of the reorganization outlined above, Pavone could become "national director emeritus" and be allowed to offer speeches around the country, but have nothing to do with the governance or management of Priests for Life, and he would be based in the Amarillo diocese responsible to the bishop. Pavone could be allowed to continue his TV appearances with EWTN. In this way, Pavone can still have a coveted microphone in his hands, but not the checkbook and control.

To read Pavone's urgent appeal, click here.

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