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The odyssey continues for Priests for Life

by Tom Gallagher

NCR Today

Only days after a desperate and urgent fundraising appeal letter seeking more than \$600,000 in the next two weeks was sent to donors, Fr. Frank Pavone, the leader of pro-life group Priests for Life, delivered another letter to his donors Saturday.

This time, Pavone unleashes an attack on President Barack Obama.

"The Obama administration is out to force you to take a direct and active role in the murder of your unborn brothers and sisters," Pavone says in the opening salvo.

"President Obama's arrogance and his disdain for those who 'cling to God' is such that, like the schoolyard bully, he thinks he can run roughshod over anyone who stands in his way or dares to defy him," Pavone writes.

"Well, he picked a fight with the wrong people when he attacked Priests for Life," he continues. "We have no intention of knuckling under. Instead, we filed a lawsuit to protect you, your conscience rights, and your freedom to practice your religion as you deem fit."

Pavone warns: "Don't be fooled by the self-proclaimed 'accommodation' Obama smugly announced after Priests for Life and a host of other religious ministries -- as well as our U.S. bishops -- voiced our steadfast opposition to his strong-arm attempt to coerce Catholics to become his merchants of death."

As if that's not enough, Pavone, in dismissing the "accommodation," rolls out the word "tyranny."

"So the moral problem remains! Tyrannical government coercion remains! That's why we filed our lawsuit," he writes.

Asking for the donors to urgently send money, Pavone says: "I'm urging you to do this because we are going up against the full might and power of the federal government and pro-abortion extremists within the Obama administration, and this includes the President himself.

"He and his minions will spare no expense to defend themselves. And they have the entire U.S. treasury at their disposal. They will hold nothing back in their unbridled attempt to compel us to bow before the state.

"That being the case, I'm asking you to rush Priests for Life as many of your hard-earned dollars as you possibly can so that we can file our lawsuit and keep it moving through the judicial system...all the way to the Supreme Court if necessary."

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It's unclear in Pavone's letter whether he's already filed the lawsuit or intends to file the lawsuit, and he changes tenses in writing about the matter:

That's ... why I'm counting on you to send the largest contribution you can to our newly established "Legal Defense Fund."

Your dollars are needed to help cover the costs of the lawsuit, including:

- Filing the lawsuit

Pavone expects the costs to be approximately \$100,000.

But what if Priests for Life, which is currently under acute financial distress, doesn't have the money to prosecute its case?

"So I turn to you [the donors] for help because Priests for Life hasn't nearly that amount in hand. Not even close," he writes.

"But I cannot wait until I have the money to act. The clock is ticking. Priests for Life has only until August 1 to win protection from the court.

"Putting all of our trust in God, we are going forward full-steam ahead."

Where to begin?

The word "spendthrift" hardly seems adequate in describing Pavone's behavior. A not-for-profit organization's board of directors has a fiduciary duty to govern the organization, especially to oversee the proper use of funds. In this case, Pavone's self-appointed and tiny PFL's board of directors includes

mostly his employees and himself. As a result, there is no standard check on the behavior of Priests for Life's executive -- in this case, Pavone himself.

Pavone cringes from personal and professional accountability. It's his way or the highway.

The harshness of the attack on Obama and the federal government is likely to make even the most ardent Tea Partiers blush. Fundamentally, it's most unbecoming of a Catholic priest, to say the least.

Is there a current need for Priests for Life to file this lawsuit?

No. In fact, none whatsoever. First of all, the administration has already backed off the mandate and recognizes a need to carve out religious institutions beyond houses of worship. Second, related issues, like self-insurers, will be addressed. Third, other Catholic organizations that are well-funded, such as Tom Monaghan's college, Ave Maria and EWTN, have already filed suit, so any argument Priests for Life proposes to make to stop the implementation of this mandate will surely be made by these Catholic organizations. Fourth, the U.S. bishops have vowed to continue to press their case until satisfied.

To pursue a needless lawsuit, given the macro picture of the issue itself, the existence of well-funded lawsuits by at least two other Catholic institutions and the fact that Priests for Life has much less than \$100,000 cash on-hand, makes Pavone's decision appear reckless and an act of grandstanding.

If ever there was a need for a personal intervention with Pavone, now is as good as any for one to occur. But by whom? By imploring the Vatican to trump the decisions of Pavone's ordinary, Bishop Patrick Zurek of the Amarillo, Texas diocese, Pavone has prevented his bishop from taking any other steps related to Pavone's ministry as a priest.

The odyssey continues.

You can read Pavone's urgent appeal here.

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