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The real Fr. Frank Pavone

by Tom Gallagher

NCR Today

In a recent blog, I highlighted the fact that a priest attending the trial of two gangsters would not identify himself to a reporter. It seemed like odd behavior to me.

Now we have the embattled national director of Priests for Life, Fr. Frank Pavone, writing in the *Washington Post's* On Faith blog, and his byline is plainly, "By Frank Pavone." Odd. Why no reference to "Father"?

Pavone, then, goes on with a reflection on the role of the church in the U.S. politics, saying the church must be an equal-opportunity critic, challenging both political parties. The essay lacks Pavone's usual unbridled bombast and attacks on President Barack Obama and his administration.

Pavone does add:

So whether the current problem [the HHS rule] will be a turning point in large measure depends on the Obama administration. Will it push the church to the point of having to shut down its institutions that provide social services, education, and health care to so many millions of Americans? Or will it have the wisdom to continue what has been and can always be a fruitful and respectful collaboration of church and state in the service of human needs?

Actually, Pavone, is wrong here.

In addition to the compromise the Obama administration promptly made and is expected to continue to make in order to get the flawed rule correct, the U.S. bishops conference and their conservative, Republican-friendly staff (Anthony Picarello, Richard Doerflinger and Mercy Sr. Mary Ann Walsh) leading the so-called "religious liberty" crusade need to walk back the intentional canard that Obama is anti-Catholic and anti-religion; to treat those with whom they disagree with dignity and respect; to lose the snarkiness, vitriol and griping (it's really bad form and ineffective to boot); to let go of the massive overreach with proposed Taco Bell exemption; and to immediately deploy equal zeal in fighting against Catholic and other Republicans lawmakers whose legislative initiatives will hurt the poor and inflict grievous harm on others.

After Pavone finishes his essay, the reader discovers that "Fr. Frank Pavone is a Catholic priest and national director of Priests for Life." Odd.

But how does Pavone really feel about Obama and the administration?

In another urgent donor letter dated March 2012, Pavone hammers Obama and the administration as Pavone asks for more money, champions his expensive and unnecessary federal lawsuit against the implementation of the yet-to-be-finalized HHS contraception rule, and asks the recipient to sign something called a "Citizens Amicus Brief" declaring the recipient's support of the lawsuit.

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Here's a sampling from Pavone's letter:

- "This is your chance to have your day in court against the Obama administration."
- "And I will refer the court to your signed "Amicus Brief" -- along with all the others I receive ... hundreds of thousands of them!"
- "We went to court in order to keep the Obama administration from **forcing you** to take a direct and active role in the murder of your unborn brothers and sisters." (emphasis included)

Pavone then describes the yet-to-be-finalized rule, as follows:

1. It **compels** every employer in America **to cooperate** in the gravely sinful act of abortion by forcing them to **pay for** 100% of an employee's prescription for abortion-causing drugs. [Emphasis included.]
2. It also **forces** them **to instruct** employees on how to obtain these morally-objectionable abortion-causing drugs. I'm talking about scientifically certified abortion-inducing drugs like the 'morning after' pill ... 'ella' and 'Plan B.' [Emphasis included.]

Here in Connecticut, Archbishop-designate William Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., en route to the Baltimore archdiocese in May 2012 and leading the Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty at the U.S. bishops conference, actually disagrees with Pavone, as Plan B is fine to use at Catholic hospitals and such usage reflects current scientific and Catholic moral understanding.

Lori and fellow Connecticut ordinaries Archbishop Henry Mansell of the Hartford archdiocese and

Bishop Michael Cote of the Norwich diocese employed their "prudential judgment" in acquiescing to the state legislature's passage of Plan B law.

Here's how the Connecticut bishops explained their abrupt, head-spinning about-face in fighting the pending Plan B legislation:

"To administer Plan B pills without an ovulation test is not an intrinsically evil act," the bishops said in a statement released through the Connecticut Catholic Conference. "Since the teaching authority of the Church has not definitively resolved this matter and since there is serious doubt about how Plan B pills work, the Catholic bishops of Connecticut have stated that Catholic hospitals in the state may follow protocols that do not require an ovulation test in the treatment of victims of rape."

What is now a must-read is *Commonweal* magazine's Grant Gallicho's essay on Lori's use of prudential judgment in the Connecticut Plan B matter.

Back to Pavone's March letter. He states:

"Simply put, Obama and his cronies want to force employers to say something that goes against their conscience. To compel them to promote a culture of death they ardently oppose."

"Our case only goes forward as long as we can keep it moving. If we run out of money, we lose by default. The Obama administration knows this. So even if we lose early on, they will appeal ... and appeal and delay ... and stall. Anything to drain us of the few precious dollars we have to protect our rights and freedoms as Americans."

Pavone exclaims, "The Obama mandate is an act of tyranny!"

If you think I'm making this up, feel free to read the letter yourself here.

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