

Priests for Life is a recognized Catholic association and a 501(c)(3) corporation whose mission is to end abortion and euthanasia. With a full-time staff of over 60 people, it is a family of ministries, encompassing Deacons for Life, Seminarians for Life, Rachel's Vineyard, the Silent No More Awareness Campaign, Gospel of Life Ministries, and more.

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Assisting God's People to Proclaim, Celebrate, and Serve the Gospel of Life.

September 12, 2011

Your Eminences and Your Excellencies:

I write to you as the Chief Canonist of Priests for Life, Inc. and on behalf of its Board of Directors. We are all deeply saddened, shocked, and puzzled by the recent letter addressed to you and all your brother bishops in the United States from Bishop Patrick Zurek of Amarillo, Texas.

Bishop Zurek's letter notified you that he is immediately recalling Father Frank Pavone from his ministry at Priests for Life—citing vague assertions of financial misconduct at Priests for Life as the primary reason for his action against Fr. Pavone.

Unfortunately, Bishop Zurek's letter contains several injurious inaccuracies and unfounded accusations which cast a serious cloud of suspicion over both Priests for Life as an organization and Father Pavone as a priest. Therefore, out of our heartfelt desire for justice and charity, we are now compelled to give you our side of the story.

Please note, however, that we make the following statement with a spirit of true charity and respect for Bishop Zurek and all the bishops in the United States. Together, Father Pavone and Priests for Life have always maintained a positive and respectful relationship with all the bishops, particularly in the public forum.

Bishop Zurek's letter focuses mainly on alleged financial mismanagement or misconduct at Priests for Life—which is the nation's largest Catholic pro-life/pro-family grassroots organization, and a private association of the faithful. For example, Bishop Zurek says about Father Pavone: "He has consistently refused to subject PFL to a transparent and complete audit of all expenditures."

This is simply untrue. PFL is audited every year by an independent, fully certified CPA firm specializing in non-profit grassroots organizations like PFL. These audits have been conducted annually for

the past ten years. Since 2005 (the year Father Pavone incardinated into the Diocese of Amarillo), PFL has submitted over 40 separate financial and management documents to the Bishop of Amarillo (His Excellency Bishop John Yanta, as well as Bishop Zurek). These included all annual audits from 2005 through 2010. The documents include quarterly statements, organizational charts, charts of accounts, internal management documents, and even the actual check register when it was requested by Bishop Zurek. Many of you have been copied when we sent these documents and have provided positive feedback. These submissions have never been acknowledged.

How this could possibly be called a “consistent refusal to subject PFL to a transparent and complete audit of all expenditures” is baffling to everyone at Priests for Life, especially the Board of Directors, as we were personally involved in this entire process of disclosure and transmission.

Bishop Zurek goes on to say, “I have reasons to be alarmed at the potential financial scandal that might arise.” This is a supposition that is based on a *feeling*—not on any facts. Indeed, Priests for Life is deliberately structured to avoid any such controversy and suspicions, which is why Father Pavone does not oversee any of the finances of PFL. A separate Financial Committee on the Board of Directors has this responsibility, and they are very mindful to be perfectly transparent to the Church as well as to our donors and any relevant government authorities, such as the IRS. Indeed, we file a complete IRS Form 990 (a very thorough financial statement required for all 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations such as PFL), and we always make that form available for public review.

We fully agree with Bishop Zurek’s statement that donors who give to PFL have a rightful expectation that the monies are being used prudently. We take issue, however, with Bishop Zurek’s statement that seems to malign PFL for being a successful ministry within the Church. He says, “PFL has become a business that is quite lucrative and provides Father Pavone with financial independence from all ecclesiastical oversight.” Again, this is simply untrue.

First and foremost, Father Frank does not draw a salary from PFL, nor does he receive a stipend or compensation of any kind from the Diocese of Amarillo, Texas. PFL pays for the extremely modest living expenses of Father Frank, which amount to less than \$2,000 a month. He does not own a home or an apartment, but lives in a small apartment rented by Priests for Life. Unfortunately, Bishop Zurek has never seen any of this for himself, because he has never accepted Father Pavone’s repeated invitations to come for a visit to PFL headquarters.

Thus you can imagine why we are so perplexed at Bishop Zurek’s statement: “Since he has consistently refused to subject PFL to a transparent and complete auditing of all expenditures, I have reasons to be alarmed at the potential financial scandal that might arise...” He then goes on to say that he needs to “correct Father Pavone’s incorrigible

defiance to my legitimate authority as his Bishop.”

We merely ask, “What incorrigible defiance?” Ever since the beginning of his pro-life ministry, Father Pavone has consistently remained obedient and faithful to his Ordinary—first in New York and then in Amarillo. When Bishop Zurek required Father Pavone to spend Holy Week and other specific days in Amarillo, Father Pavone complied. When Bishop Zurek required Father Pavone to spend 60 days in Amarillo, Father Pavone worked to cancel many previously arranged speaking engagements and juggled other commitments so that he could comply with his bishop’s wishes. Finally, he sent Bishop Zurek two letters about going to Amarillo, one with a detailed list of the dates that he would be available for ministry in Amarillo. These letters and others assured the Bishop of his obedience and readiness to comply with the Bishop’s demands. But these letters were never acknowledged by Bishop Zurek. Instead, the Bishop’s reply to Fr. Pavone, in a letter dated September 6, made no reference to Fr. Pavone’s clear readiness to comply, but rather insisted that Fr. Pavone had ignored the Bishop’s request.

The distressing conclusion of Bishop Zurek’s letter seems to us to be an outright and unjustified attack on the work of Priests for Life as a whole, which is much more grave than his real or imagined difficulty with Father Pavone. In His Excellency’s final paragraph, he asks you to “inform the Christian faithful under your care to consider withholding donations to PFL.” Herein lies the danger of introducing an element of mistrust toward an organization with an earned, longstanding and positive reputation, along with praise and endorsements from bishops and cardinals throughout the United States and the Vatican. Bishop Zurek’s denunciation of Priests for Life has already provoked scandal where none exists, thereby fulfilling the concern he professes to have. Based merely on insinuations, misunderstandings, and conjecture, a public accusation against Priests for Life—calling into question the organization’s ethics and spirit—tarnishes and stigmatizes what has become a most prominent pro-life ministry in the Church. Everyone will be harmed—including the unborn—perhaps irrevocably. Perhaps what is most distressing is the fact that the denunciations are predicated on non-existent facts. Documentary evidence that leads to the opposite conclusion and that is readily accepted in professional circles exists and is in the possession of Bishop Zurek and others concerned with Priests for Life.

Therefore, we have been left with no choice but to write to you openly and frankly about this matter so that any further damage to all concerned can be minimized. On behalf of the Board of Directors of Priests for Life, I urge you to look carefully into this matter and express your concerns to Bishop Zurek.

In anticipation of the necessity of a hierarchical recourse before the Congregation for the Clergy, we have formally petitioned Bishop Zurek to rescind his directive suspending

Fr. Pavone's priestly ministry outside of the Diocese of Amarillo for an indefinite period, and are asking that he permit Fr. Pavone to continue his work with Priests for Life. This must be done, even though elsewhere Bishop Zurek has threatened in writing to withdraw Fr. Pavone permanently from pro-life ministry if he were to exercise his canonical rights to hierarchical recourse. As an association that has always sought to be faithful to the Church and its teaching, this is the only forum left to us within the Church.

It should be noted that since we have formally petitioned Bishop Zurek to rescind his penal decree of September 6, under the law as contained in the norm of canon 1353, the effects of that decree are suspended by the law itself until the matter is resolved by hierarchical recourse. In other words, under the canon law of the Church, *Fr. Pavone is free to continue his pro-life ministry full-time outside the diocese of Amarillo until this matter is decided by the Vatican.*

Despite the suspension of the penalties in Bishop Zurek's decree, and Fr. Pavone's clear right to continue his pro-life work outside the diocese of Amarillo, Fr. Pavone will obediently report to Amarillo on September 13, in the hopes that he can resolve this matter through mutual dialogue with the Bishop, and that it will not become necessary for him to initiate a hierarchical recourse before the Congregation for the Clergy in Rome.

Already, however, Bishop Zurek's letter has been obtained by the news media, which will no doubt use it as fodder against the Church and the pro-life movement. It is our hope and prayer that this perplexing action on the part of the Bishop of Amarillo—which has the potential to cause so much unnecessary damage in the pro-life movement—can somehow be remedied in a speedy fashion.

Above all, we want you to know that we do not impugn in any way Bishop Zurek's motives, but instead fervently desire a peaceful and amicable resolution to the whole matter.

With our loyal and obedient deference to you and all the shepherds of the Church, I remain,

Fr. David Deibel, JCL



Chief Canonist, Priests for Life