

## Summary of How Fr. Frank and Priests for Life Have Been Treated by Some in **the Hierarchy**

***{Please note that this document will continue to be updated with more links to source documents.}***

### **Introduction**

Dear Friends,

I have always said to pro-life activists that if you defend the unborn, you will be treated like them. Just like their very being and legitimacy is denied, so will yours be. Just as they are excluded and mistreated, so will you be.

We all expect that the pro-abortion groups, like Planned Parenthood, will target, harass and try to intimidate us. And they do try.

But when such treatment comes from bishops and other Church authorities – which it increasingly does -- it's particularly deplorable. Instead of supporting and encouraging the pro-life work of the Church, some of these men try to obstruct and hinder it, and abuse their authority to try to intimidate priests and laity who make ending abortion the top priority of our lives.

And make no mistake... if they oppose priests like me, it's because they're opposing *you* and the commitment you have to this cause.

Cancel culture is alive and well in the Catholic Church. I've experienced it firsthand. And the more we are aware of it, the better we will be able to defend ourselves and others from it.

Now I am not one to complain or publicly criticize others. Nor do I want to distract you, my friends, from the key thing we have to be thinking about and discussing, which is the task of ending abortion. [Nor do I want you to miss the fact that we get a lot of encouraging support for our work, including from Church leaders.](#)

But to the extent that the actions of certain bishops get in the way of that very mission, I will speak. And to help our friends who have questions about how we are being treated by these bishops, and also to refute our enemies who love to make up their own stories about all this, I will speak about what has transpired so that you have the full story and so that you can help defend me and other priests like me.

### **Context: Abortion and the Response of the Church**

I was ordained by pro-life hero Cardinal John O'Connor of New York. Ever since he died over 20 years ago, I have had to fight (against bishops!) to defend the pro-life work [he gave me permission to do](#), and to continue devoting all my time and energy to fighting abortion.

I'm actually in good company, because he told me that even he, as a Cardinal, had to fight against pushback he received from other bishops for making the abortion issue such a visible priority. In other words, it's not simply a problem of "Fr. Frank Pavone" or "Priests for Life" – It has become a systemic problem in the institutional Church.

This was true in some fashion from the beginning of the modern pro-abortion movement in America, as evidenced by Dr. Bernard Nathanson himself, a key architect of the abortion industry. Dr.

Nathanson, after becoming pro-life, revealed how he and his colleagues deliberately made the Catholic Church a target of their propaganda campaigns, and took a calculated risk that the clergy would be asleep on this issue. As he later explained (and you can read it in his books), he and his colleagues did find the clergy asleep. I heard Dr. Nathanson say more than once to the Catholic clergy, “We would have never gotten away with what we did if you had been united, purposeful, and strong.”

[This is why he became a strong supporter of Priests for Life, because he knew the key strategic importance of galvanizing the clergy in the fight against abortion.](#)

Now I have always been a firm believer in (and defender of) the hierarchical structure of the Church and the role of the bishops as successors of the apostles. My writings and recorded sermons over these decades of my priesthood prove that. But no priest, bishop or Pope owns the deposit of faith; rather, we serve it. “My message is not my own,” Jesus himself said (Jn. 7:16), and he declared of the Holy Spirit, “He will not speak on his own” (Jn. 16:13). Much less do we. We are commissioned to preach a message that is not of our making, that we cannot change, and which the faithful have a right to hear “in all its rigor and vigor” (John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, n. 30).

But just as in constitutional law, all the rules seem to change when it comes to abortion, so it is in the Church. We can defend the poor and sick, the immigrant and the death row inmate, as vigorously as we want (and indeed we should), but the defense of the child in the womb, the weakest and most defenseless of all, is met with constant warnings not to focus too exclusively or strongly on it. Bishops have told me, “Fr. Frank, you’re too aggressive on abortion.” My response is that when abortion stops being so aggressive on the little babies it kills, then we can talk.

The Catholic Church indeed has consistently held the correct position on abortion, and that fact has attracted countless pro-life advocates to join the Church, or at least to highly respect her from afar. I have received into the Catholic Church many who have entered precisely from that motivation.

But at the same time we hear this consistent feedback:

“I hardly hear any preaching about abortion.”

“I can’t get my pastor to mention abortion in the prayers of the faithful.”

“My pastor won’t let us have a pro-life group.”

“My pastor says this issue is too political.”

For three decades, we at Priests for Life have probed the reasons why this happens, and we’ve come to the sad conclusion that among various causes, one of the most prevalent is this:

*Priests and other Church leaders are not strong against abortion because their bishops tell them not to be.*

Sure, the teaching of the Church is very clear and consistent. And there are many examples of strong pro-life leadership. Moreover, we have echoed far and wide the excellent pro-life documents that the Catholic bishops have issued, such as *Living the Gospel of Life*, which you can learn about at our special website [www.GospelOfLife.net](http://www.GospelOfLife.net).

But the fact is that many Church leaders are governing out of fear, and many are Democrat loyalists and do not want to offend their friends in the Party of Death. So they tell us to shut up.

And this problem is compounded by the fact that many bishops have isolated themselves from the rest of the Church, as Russell Shaw, former Communications Director for the bishop's conference, describes in his book [Nothing to Hide](#). Instead of taking the time to listen, encounter, and learn about the lifesaving work of the pro-life movement, many of them just try to hamper it from afar. The bishops who criticize Priests for Life, for example, couldn't describe the work we do if their lives depended on it. On the other hand, those in the hierarchy who are our supporters – and we have many of them – have taken the time to talk to us, visit us, and understand where we are coming from.

All in the Church would be wise to heed these words of Pope Francis:

*“The invitation to “come and see”, which was part of those first moving encounters of Jesus with the disciples, is also the method for all authentic human communication. In order to tell the truth of life that becomes history, it is necessary to move beyond the complacent attitude that we “already know” certain things. Instead, we need to go and see them for ourselves, to spend time with people, to listen to their stories and to confront reality, which always in some way surprises us”* ([Jan. 23, 2021, Message for the 2021 World Communications Day](#)).

The pro-life movement has wonderful leaders and activists, and wonderful stories to tell. We don't get tired of this work, because saving lives and extending God's mercy to the wounded is so fulfilling and energizing.

Would that our shepherds in Christ could all catch that energy and enthusiasm.

By means of this writing I'll help you to understand more deeply – and through many examples – the cancel culture in the Church in regard to the pro-life movement and what we need to do about it. Some of this was published originally as a five-part interview by my friend Dr. Deal Hudson in [TheChristianReview.com](#) between the end of 2021 and mid-2022. Since then I have expanded and combined the material, including more links to original documents.

Let's pray that Church leaders open their eyes and ears and decide to stand with us as a movement, rather than against us.

-- Fr. Frank Pavone

## Part One

### 1. I understand you are concerned about your canonical status as an ordained Catholic priest and the head of Priests for Life. Why is that?

Well, as far as Priests for Life is concerned, I could not be happier with our Board of Directors, Advisors and staff. We are all of one mind in the mission we are carrying out to end abortion, and I enjoy their unanimous support of my leadership. And our base of supporters in the public continues to grow larger every year.

As far as support from leaders in the Church, it is a mixed bag. On the one hand, [as people can read on my website](#), we have a lot of strong support from bishops and Cardinals throughout the world. After all, our mission isn't complicated: we're trying to stop the killing of babies.

Even Pope Francis, on the five occasions I have been able to meet with him, has encouraged me in my work. "Go forward with that," he told me.

But, and it's sad to say, I've suffered from an abuse of authority from a number of bishops, who have lied to me and about me, have tried to block my work and take over my board, have launched fake "investigations," and have constantly changed the goal posts in their expectations and requirements of me and my ministry.

I have had to repeatedly defend my rights using the processes that Church law provides, and on multiple occasions the Vatican has removed obstacles that certain bishops have put in place, but it's a constant battle.

Many faithful Christians would presume that if there is a disagreement or dispute in the Church, the bishops would at least treat their priests with respect, have regard for their basic human rights, be honest and show good will. But unfortunately, that's not the case.

## **2. So it sounds like this is a long and complex story of back and forth battles with the hierarchy, with some of the story made public but a lot of other things behind the scenes.**

Let's take it step by step. First, help us to understand the background. How did you get into fulltime prolife work as a priest in the first place?

I was ordained to the priesthood for the Archdiocese of New York by Cardinal John O'Connor in 1988. He was a pro-life champion – for him, no issue was more important for the Church to address than abortion. In fact, he started a religious congregation, the Sisters of Life, to help address the problem. And he was instrumental in starting Priests for Life.

My own call to the priesthood, [about which I have never had a moment's doubt](#), was intertwined from the beginning with a call to the pro-life movement; both began in 1976, when I was a senior at the Port Chester Public High School. Over the years of my seminary formation and my initial years of parish work in Staten Island, NY, my pro-life activities grew, and began to extend beyond the local level to the national level.

Then, after four and a half years of very happy and multi-faceted ministry in a large parish, I felt a "call within a call;" I was certain that I wanted to devote all my time and energy to defending the unborn from abortion.

I set up an appointment with Cardinal O'Connor to ask his permission to do this. And between the time we set the appointment and the day we had it, I got a call from the priest who had started "Priests for Life," which I had already joined. He told me he was entering military chaplaincy and that we would need a new director of this relatively new ministry. He asked if I was interested. I said yes, and when I asked the Cardinal for permission to do pro-life work full time, I suggested that being the first full-time director of Priests for Life could be the means of carrying out such ministry.

Cardinal O'Connor said yes, and my fulltime ministry as National Director of Priests for Life began on September 1, 1993.

**3. So Cardinal O'Connor let you establish your Priests for Life headquarters on Staten Island. At a certain point you transferred to the Diocese of Amarillo, TX. Why did that happen?**

Well the first part of that story is that after Cardinal O'Connor died in 2000, his successor, Cardinal Edward Egan, said he wanted me to do parish work. I explained to him that my fulltime pro-life work was not simply an assignment, but a vocation. In conscience, I could not walk away from fulltime pro-life work. And why would he want me to?

Sadly, he showed no understanding or respect for my position. Here I was at the helm of a flourishing national and international ministry which enjoyed the support of the Vatican (where I even spent two years working from 1997 to 1999 in the office charged with fostering the pro-life activities of the Church), and which enjoyed the support of numerous faithful. I had become, arguably, the most visible Catholic priest in fulltime pro-life work, and I was calling others to give all the time and energy they could to defending the unborn.

How, then, would I justify in my own mind stepping away from that work?

Sure, I understand the concept of authority and obedience in the Church. But when I saw how Cardinal Egan refused to even engage in a conversation about my pro-life calling – which Cardinal O'Connor had nurtured and which he even suggested could lead to a new community of priests devoted to pro-life work (just as he had established the Sisters of Life) – and when I was told that Cardinal Egan wasn't even obliged to give me a *reason* why he was asking me to step away from my work for the unborn, I objected.

So did a lot of other people, who began writing to the Cardinal and calling his office, explaining that the Church needed *more priests engaged in the pro-life cause*, not fewer, and that while many priests could serve in parishes, not all had the calling to do what I was doing, traveling full time to advocate for the unborn, engaging the media, the abortion industry and the government on what the Church had already declared was the most pressing moral issue of the day.

I asked the Cardinal to help me.

I had no doubt about my calling as a priest. And I didn't need a lecture on Canon Law 101.

I needed a spiritual father who could give me the blessing of the Church to fulfill my calling to be a priest who, in conscience, could continue devoting himself fulltime to advancing the protection of the unborn, consistent with the teachings of the Catholic Church.

The Cardinal refused to help me. He refused to be that spiritual father. He had *one* conversation with me, in which he kept referring to my "charcoal black hair" and that we needed more priests in the parishes with black hair instead of white. The conversation was a one-way street. He had made up his mind, without asking me anything, and was simply there to convey his royal decree.

When I told him that I would inform my Board and associates at Priests for Life of what he had said, and begin consulting with them about the next steps, he said, “You just had your consultation.”

In other words, to hell with the ministry you just spent seven years building and serving, and the dedicated priests and lay men and women who likewise worked day and night to make the ministry a success, and who, with their families, were dependent on the salary they got from Priests for Life. No consultation with them mattered, no further discussion was needed.

Never mind the message given to the pro-life movement: we’re taking this visible pro-life priest who is a national pro-life leader and putting him back in a parish.

The Cardinal had spoken. Nobody else’s opinion was supposed to matter. And he gave no indication that he understood or even heard my concerns.

That’s not “authority” and “obedience.” That’s a failure in leadership – a failure to be a father, a supporter, an encourager, one who helps his priests to flourish in their particular vocations, and use the talents God gave them to serve the wider Church.

Sure, I understand the need for priests in a parish. I also understand the need for the unborn to be protected, and for priests to minister to the pro-life movement. This is a need of the universal Church. A bishop is not just entrusted with his own diocese; he shares responsibility for the good of the entire Church, in all its dimensions – not just in making sure parishes have priests with “charcoal black hair.”

And what was I supposed to say in the parish when I preached? “Well folks, as you know, I just spent seven years telling the world that we have an emergency, a holocaust of children, that we have to stop, and that we have to devote all our energy to doing so.” And then what was I supposed to say next? The emergency has stopped? Or it wasn’t as important as it used to be?

There was no way I could do that. I had made an irrevocable commitment in conscience to devote every ounce of my energy, every moment of my time, to defending the unborn.

To show respect to the Cardinal’s authority, I suggested that I could accept an assignment to a small parish whose pastor was willing to let me continue my work, travels and advocacy with Priests for Life.

A priest I knew offered to do exactly that, and the Cardinal assigned me to that parish.

But as time went on, he indicated – again, without any conversation, but just with a one-way communication – that he didn’t want me doing the work of Priests for Life.

So it wasn’t a matter of needing me in a parish. I had accepted the assignment. It was a matter of not letting me do pro-life work.

It was at that point that I asked him if I could transfer out of the New York Archdiocese, where it was clear I no longer had the support to fulfill my vocation to full time priestly pro-life work.

In order to do that in the Church, a priest needs a “receiving bishop,” and I had one. The bishop of Amarillo, Bishop John Yanta, who had been a member of Priests for Life before becoming a bishop, was convinced, as was I, that abortion is the pre-eminent issue of our day and deserved the pastoral

attention of the Church, to the point not only of letting priests devote themselves fulltime to defending the unborn, but also of forming a community of such priests.

Cardinal Egan refused to let me transfer. No explanation. Simply another one-way communication was sent to me, saying the Archdiocese of New York wasn't allowing its priests to switch to other dioceses.

So I appealed to the Vatican. I visited with Cardinal Castrillon-Hoyos, who was in charge of the Congregation for Clergy, which handles these matters. He had been a friend of Cardinal O'Connor and understood my work. We had a good conversation. As I left his office and was about to walk out the door, he called out to me and said, "Do the Lord's work – for those who do the Lord's work, the Lord protects" and he smiled.

Subsequently he told Cardinal Egan to let me leave the Archdiocese and join the Diocese of Amarillo. That occurred in 2005.

That was the first of many victories for our work, but certainly not the last of the battles.

## **Part Two**

**1. In the first part of our interview, you told us how Cardinal O'Connor of New York gave you permission to devote your ministry to protecting the unborn from abortion, but how his successor, Cardinal Egan, did not want to let you continue doing that, despite the success of the ministry.**

**Let's go back to that for a moment. Do you have any indication of why Cardinal Egan did not want you to continue a successful pro-life ministry ?**

Yes, I do, because another Cardinal let me in on it.

One day in Casper, Wyoming, when I was on a trip in March of 2001 speaking to clergy and women's groups in the diocese (and I am on the road most of the time in my Priests for Life ministry), I received a phone call at about 7:30am local time as I was getting out of a car at my first venue of the day. It was from Cardinal William Keeler, who at that time was the Archbishop of Baltimore. He was calling me in his capacity as the Chairman of the US Bishops' Committee on Pro-life Activities. He evidently didn't know I was on Mountain time, two hours earlier than Eastern Time.

He told me he had just gotten off the phone with two other cardinals... Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston, and my own Ordinary, Cardinal Edward Egan. All three of them were talking about me and Priests for Life.

Why?

Because we had recently [launched a national billboard campaign to promote awareness that healing and forgiveness are available](#) to those who have had abortions.

And to make a long story short, the bishops wanted it done *their way*. They wanted us to use the money we had raised for our billboard campaign and *use it to put up the billboards they had designed*, because, they maintained, theirs were better and, after all, they're the bishops.

**2. So what was the concern of the bishops about your billboard project?**

There were three concerns: a) they didn't think the content was appropriate; b) they didn't think we had adequately consulted them, and c) they didn't think the Churches were ready to receive the number of people who would come forward as a result of a major advertising campaign.

Now my team and I don't mind criticism offered in good will; we all can learn from it.

But what was disturbing about the bishops' concerns – and those who worked for them – was the heavy-handed, controlling attitude that they displayed. This was my first real exposure to that, and there would be a lot more to come. And it continues to this day.

The bishops ordered us, at our expense, to take down the billboards we had put up, and to throw away the ones we had made. They didn't ask about the consultation we had undertaken and the advice we had received from experts in healing after abortion. Their own experts were all that mattered to them.

And saddest of all, I had one of the bishops' key advisors on healing after abortion say to me that they were concerned that someone would see the billboards, turn to the local Church for help, find no response, and commit suicide.

One wonders why, 28 years after *Roe*, the bishops felt so unprepared. Moreover, what about those who would commit suicide because they never received the offer of help in the first place?

This whole thing just struck me as cowardice.

### **3. How was the matter resolved?**

My board and I cooperated with the bishops, although at first, Cardinal Keeler didn't give me a chance... I was on the road constantly, and because I didn't respond to one of his letters immediately (it was at the office; I wasn't), he *wrote to all the bishops about my lack of cooperation* before I could even get back to my desk to read his letter.

Once I did, I set things in motion to stop using the billboards we had made. The bishops' pro-life committee and I issued a joint press release saying we were happy to work together. Our bishop advisors congratulated me on doing a good job at resolving the matter.

But the bureaucrats at the bishops' conference continued to badmouth our work, including in Rome, and to try to hinder the healing ministry we were carrying out in partnership with Rachel's Vineyard, which two years later, at the request of its founders, Dr. Theresa and Kevin Burke, became a ministry of Priests for Life. Since that time (2003) I have served as the Pastoral Director of this largest ministry for healing after abortion in the world.

[Click here for a more extensive commentary on the billboard controversy, with additional documents.](#)

### **4. So picking up from our last interview, what happened once the Vatican permitted you to incardinate into the Diocese of Amarillo?**

Bishop John Yanta [established a "Society of Apostolic Life"](#) called the Missionaries of the Gospel of Life, and we began accepting and training seminarians to eventually do fulltime pro-life work as priests, just as I was doing. [I made a public profession of vows to devote my entire life and ministry to this mission of ending abortion](#) (just as I had already been doing since 1993). It was accepted and signed by the bishop.

But as time went on, we realized that the model Priests for Life had established since 1993, namely, that priests and lay people living in different places would be available at all times to respond to the needs of the pro-life movement and travel around the country doing that work, was not compatible with a centralized community, as a Society of Apostolic Life required. The bishop was rightly concerned that I wasn't in Amarillo enough.

Various bishop advisors and the Vatican eventually helped us discern that we had all moved too quickly to set up the Society, without giving ourselves enough time to experiment with that model.

I was content, however, to be able to say that we had made the effort to find a home in the Church for priests, like me, who felt called to devote their ministry to saving the unborn. That ministry would continue, according to the structure it had since 1993, with my team of priests and laity traveling the nation and the world non-stop to end abortion.

#### **5. After that, Bishop Yanta's time came to retire, and Bishop Patrick Zurek became bishop of Amarillo. Did he welcome you?**

He was a problem from before he became Bishop of Amarillo. While he was still auxiliary bishop in San Antonio, the bishop came to one of our Priests for Life receptions at the bishops' conference, only to leave one of our top donors in tears because of a discussion he had with her in which he complained about the effort to have priests preach often on abortion. This donor told me, "He certainly doesn't like you," and then after she left, the bishop chided me, saying, "This was not good. You can't have priests preaching on abortion all the time."

As if that was what we advocate. How about asking me what we do rather than chiding me for a caricature of what we do?

In his first meeting with me as my new bishop, he said, "My wish for your ministry is not death" and "I do not dislike you."

He never gave me a letter of endorsement for the work of Priests for Life, and shortly into his administration, he asked me to remove from the Priests for Life website any mention of his name, including documents we had posted of his pro-life statements and talks, and asked me also to remove my "Celebret" card, which bore his signature.

He refused multiple opportunities and invitations to visit our Priests for Life headquarters, did not ever acknowledge the letters Priests for Life sent him, and despite my years of experience in the pro-life cause, never asked my input or assistance for the respect life activities of the diocese.

***As we continue this very long and detailed story, we will see how this bishop lied to me and about me publicly, violated various norms of canon law in trying to stop my work, was corrected by the Vatican multiple times in regard to his mistreatment of me, and how in fact he is persisting to this day in trying to have me dismissed from the priesthood! This is so despite the fact that my ministry and I have been so strongly supported over the years by the Vatican, by other bishops, and by the People of God in every denomination, as has been well documented at [www.PriestsForLife.org/Praise](http://www.PriestsForLife.org/Praise).***

***Indeed, the best thing that people can do about all this is simply to become more familiar with our work at Priests for Life, be involved with our projects, and support our efforts to end abortion!***

### **Part Three – How Bishop Zurek (Amarillo) Abused Priests for Life While the Vatican Supported Us**

**1. In the previous interview, you told us that you and your fulltime pro-life ministry received a rather cold reception from Bishop Patrick Zurek when he came to Amarillo in 2008. Did things improve as time went on?**

No, they got worse, although with the wider Church, [our support grew stronger than ever](#).

But regarding Bishop Zurek, let me give you the example of when we saved Baby Joseph in Canada in 2011. You can see [www.BabyJosephCentral.com](http://www.BabyJosephCentral.com) for details, but this was a child who needed a tracheotomy, and when the Canadian healthcare system refused to give it to him, the family asked for our help. Our supporters lobbied the hospital and got them to let us take him to the United States, where a Catholic hospital helped him. Everyone was rejoicing.

Except Bishop Zurek.

He said to me, “You probably shouldn’t have done it.” He said people were donating to Priests for Life in the USA instead of Priests for Life-Canada (a separate organization).

Then, early in 2012, Priests for Life [was the fourth group to sue the Obama-Biden Administration](#) for trying to force us to include abortion in the health care plans we offer our employees. Various Catholic ministries and even dioceses joined in these lawsuits. We ultimately prevailed, and again everyone was rejoicing.

Except Bishop Zurek.

Instead of thanking or encouraging us in the slightest, all he could do was ask why we were raising money for our expenses in pursuing the case. (The fact was that our attorneys were handling the case *pro bono*, which spared us a lot of expense, but not all. But the bishop didn’t bother to ask about those details.)

Another time I was with Bishop Zurek, he said that we at Priests for Life “were not really in line with the US bishops,” but he couldn’t specify what he meant. Meanwhile, USCCB General Secretary Msgr. David Malloy (now a bishop himself) told me that many bishops had indicated to him their gratitude for how Priests for Life always promoted the bishops' documents and teachings.

One aspect of my work is that I am pastoral director of [Rachel’s Vineyard](#), throughout the world. It is the largest ministry for helping those who have had abortions to find forgiveness and healing. Many dioceses have utilized its services over the years, including Amarillo. Bishop Zurek decided he didn’t want Rachel’s Vineyard operating in his diocese anymore and withdrew all his support from this healing work.

We have also always maintained an advisory board of bishops. At a certain point I started getting letters from some of these bishops abruptly resigning from the advisory board, without any conversation with me. Some of them told me in writing that they had done this because Bishop Zurek called and asked them to. They didn’t refer to any reasons why they couldn’t support the work itself.

**2. Fr. Frank, in any diocese, as you know, the bishop is not the only official. There is a Vicar for Priests, who is supposed to help the priests of that diocese. Did you discuss these matters with that person in Amarillo?**

I certainly did.

The vicar's name was Msgr. Harold Waldow (he is, unfortunately, now deceased). He told me in 2010 that Bishop Zurek did not have my best interests at heart and that I should seek another diocese. [A letter he wrote explained](#), in reference to things the bishop asked me for, "I can state unequivocally that Father Pavone responded promptly, respectfully, and appropriately." He then wrote about a meeting he attended with me and the bishop, "Father Pavone related his discernment of many years' duration of having been called to pro-life ministry in the Church and his concomitant frustration at the experience of failure in achieving the same within existing ecclesial polity. It was an open, respectful revelation on Father Pavone's part."

So how would you expect a bishop respond to that?

Msgr. Waldow continues, "***Bishop Zurek responded with an expression of anger and withdrawal from the meeting.*** At that time I informed Father Pavone that it was my personal opinion that he should seek another bishop/diocese."

**3. Did anyone complain to Bishop Zurek about you and how did he respond?**

Yes, the bishop would tell me at various times that he received complaints from people who did not like my work, but both he and I understood that this came with the territory of a very visible ministry. He also received many positive comments (as I heard not from him, but from some of his advisors, and from the people who copied me on their correspondence).

The bishop also let me know at one point back in 2009 that he had received complaints that I was being too friendly with certain people on my staff. I took the complaints seriously and consulted my spiritual director and other advisors. I learned a lot from that incident about how friendly behavior from someone in a position of authority can have far more of a negative impact than I thought it did, and could make people feel uncomfortable in ways I never intended them to feel. I was very open with the bishop and with my advisors, all of whom were satisfied that we brought the matter to a respectful and satisfactory conclusion. At that point, as well as subsequently, the bishop expressed his confidence in my suitability for priestly ministry (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

**4. But while all this was happening, was the bishop allowing you to continue your traveling, speaking, broadcasting, and national pro-life work? You were keeping quite busy with it, weren't you?**

I was keeping very busy with Priests for Life, making several speaking trips per week, broadcasting on EWTN and other outlets, training priests at the invitation of many dioceses and pro-life groups, overseeing the world's largest ministry for healing after abortion, and managing a growing staff with numerous other pro-life projects.

But then, without any warning whatsoever, Bishop Zurek [sent a letter not just to me but to all the bishops of the country](#) (and simultaneously leaked by someone to the media) saying that he had "suspended" me and wanted me to stop traveling, stop broadcasting, stop doing Priests for Life work

and that within a few days I had to return to Amarillo for an undetermined period of prayer and reflection.

He told me I had to stay at the convent of a group of sisters, the “Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ” outside of Amarillo. They told me they had been given no advance preparation or explanation as to why I was there. The priest with whom I met at the bishop’s request likewise had been given no background on the events leading up to me being there.

On the very day the bishop asked me to report to the diocese, September 13, 2011, he took off on a plane for a trip to Brazil.

Now the word “suspended” is a canonical term indicating that a priest may no longer function as a priest because he’s being punished for having done something wrong. I presume the bishop knew this. However, that’s not what he was doing, because he wanted me to function as a priest within the Diocese (but only there), and had not indicated any wrongdoing that would merit suspension. But he used that word, and the media picked up on it, including the Catholic News Service and the Associated Press. The word was out, I was “suspended.”

When the Catholic News Service called me *after* publicly saying I was suspended, I said to them, “I have good news for you – I’m not suspended.” (Fast forward to my trip to the Vatican to sort this out, and the second in command at the Congregation for Clergy said to me in Italian, “Non sei sospeso” – “You are **not** suspended.”)

As soon as I reported, as ordered, to Amarillo, I sat down with Msgr. Harold Waldow, who was running things in the bishop’s absence as Vicar of Clergy and Moderator of the Curia. I asked him to write a public letter clarifying my status and he did so right away. [The letter pointed out that I was a priest “in good standing”](#) and that the bishop’s action “does not mean that Father Pavone is being charged with any malfeasance.”

My main canonical advisor, Fr. Dave Deibel, also [wrote a letter to all the bishops](#) stating that what Bishop Zurek said in his letter to the bishops – namely, that I wasn’t being transparent about the finances of Priests for Life -- was simply not true. We had annual independent audits, which were all good, and we sent to the bishop all the financial information he requested.

Now the bishop, on the other hand, would never acknowledge receiving the [financial reports we sent](#) him until [we insisted with his attorney](#) that he do so. He [finally sent us a letter acknowledging receipt](#), and then he sent [another letter on November 6<sup>th</sup>](#) saying he would review all the material and then convene a meeting to resolve any remaining questions.

That November 6 letter was the last thing I ever heard from him about our finances. He never convened the meeting and didn’t get back to us anymore about it.

Meanwhile, [we continued to enjoy the support of many bishops](#).

(Fast forward – the Vatican later confirmed that Priests for Life finances were in order and welladministered. Incidentally, for a long time I chose not to receive a Priests for Life salary, used my own savings as donations to the ministry, and currently have an annual salary of \$14,681 (*fourteen thousand six-hundred and eighty-one*)).

## 5. Did the Bishop put a timetable on your stay in Amarillo, and how was it resolved?

The bishop gave no timetable or deadline.

I appealed his action to the Vatican, which is always an option for a priest who feels he has been wronged. I followed all the procedures under the guidance of a team of canonical experts both in the US and in Rome.

Meanwhile, every communication with the bishop made things worse, and my canonical advisors told me not to meet with him until the Vatican ruled on my appeal. In the midst of this, [the bishop even asked the sisters where I was staying to place one of his letters to me on a consecrated altar](#) prior to me saying mass, [so that I would see it](#) when I kissed the altar at the start of Mass!

The Vatican eventually upheld my appeal, saying that the bishop had acted wrongly, that I was not suspended, and that I could resume my ministry outside the diocese.

It was already May of 2012 when this decision by the Vatican came out. The bishop posted on his website that the Vatican had upheld my position. [Then I had a phone conversation with him](#), in which he told me that I could resume my ministry of travel and broadcasting, just as I had been doing before, "without restriction."

But, believe it or not, about a week later I was in his office and **he completely reversed himself**, saying I could not travel, speak, broadcast, or even concelebrate Mass in public lest people see me and be reminded of Priests for Life.

The reason he gave was [expressed in a letter he later sent me](#), saying that Archbishop Celso Morgia, the second in charge at the Vatican's Congregation for the Clergy (the office to which I had made my appeal and won) **told him he could not currently allow me to resume my pro-life ministry outside the diocese.**

It had to wait, he claimed, for the Vatican to look over our ministry, by means of something called a "Visitation," which basically means that a bishop they appoint would come and meet with our team and see how we do things, and make a report with recommendations as to how to improve. [We welcomed that and did it.](#)

But I flew to Rome before the Visitation and met with Archbishop Morgia, [and asked the Archbishop if what Bishop Zurek had told me was accurate.](#) Archbishop Morgia told him **no, that this was not the case.** On the contrary, the Archbishop said, he had instructed the bishop to "be generous" in his permission to Fr. Frank to continue his Priests for Life work.

[A letter I received from the Congregation for Clergy made clear](#) that Bishop Zurek "is entirely free to grant you permission to minister outside of the Diocese."

He was not generous and did not restore this permission during all the time that the Visitation was taking place.

## 6. What was the result of the Vatican Visitation?

It was a good report, with recommendations on how to improve things based on the canonical structure we had at the time. However, the Vatican made clear in its report that [these were only recommendations, not orders. None of them were obligatory; they were all optional.](#)

Nevertheless, [we moved ahead to implement most of them.](#) This was done via [a formal meeting and unanimous vote of the Priests for Life Board of Directors.](#)

Of particular importance was this point in the Vatican's report (Prot. N. 20133327):

*"The financial administration of Priests for Life {Priests for Life} has been publicly called into question. Despite various accounts to the contrary, it is the opinion of the Apostolic Visitor that the Association has been relatively well administered financially... There has been an annual Audit of the Association every year...[T]he work and finances of PFL are in order... [T]he administrative costs of PFL are in keeping with other groups receiving similar funding in the United States."*

## 7. Given the clean report on finances, did Bishop Zurek repair the damage he had done to your reputation?

No, he said nothing and did nothing to reverse the damage he had done by writing to the bishops that my financial management of Priests for Life was questionable. Media reports persist to this day that large sums of money were unaccounted for. We don't know what they are referring to; we even had sent the bishop our check registry!

So seeing that he was going to do nothing about restoring our reputation, I asked the Vatican to intervene. Remember, the report referenced above was not a public document...so while they cleared our name internally, nobody on the outside knew about it.

[The Vatican's response was](#) that since we were an "Association of the Faithful" based in New York, then under canon law was Cardinal Timothy Dolan who would be the appropriate person to restore our reputation.

We approached him, but he imposed a whole new set of requirements, including a "forensic audit," carried out by one of his associates, but at our expense, and gave me a list of people whom he wanted to be on our Board of Directors, including one of the bishops in his own Ecclesiastical Province who, the Cardinal said, could serve as Board Chairman in place of me.

[I began the process of cooperating with the Cardinal](#) but all my advisors – civil, canonical and financial – told me they could not go along with the Cardinal's requests, [and respectfully let him know why.](#) In short, a) it is the Board of the Directors of Priests for Life who is responsible for electing the members of the Board and its Chair, and b) no forensic audit is needed in the absence of any accusation of wrongdoing and no results of such an audit will satisfy critics who lack goodwill.

Our position was – and remains now – that if someone has a question or objection about our finances, they should ask the question or raise the objection specifically. Nobody has done so, then or now, including the bishops.

And somehow in all of this, Bishop Zurek and Cardinal Dolan maintained that I – Fr. Frank Pavone – was being uncooperative and disobedient.

For that to make any sense whatsoever, one would have to posit that the management of Priests for Life occurs without any Board or legal or financial advisors, or any autonomy – but simply depends in every way on the decision of one person. That’s not the reality.

So in the end, Cardinal Dolan did not clear our good name as the Vatican told us he could; rather, he made it worse by telling the Vatican and the media that he was “cutting ties” with the organization.

With all due respect, we pointed out that the ongoing success of our ministry – a success that continues to this day – has had nothing to do with any “ties” we had with the Cardinal.

*And as if all this were not enough drama, the story was about to get even more interesting...*

#### **Part Four –Seeking the Help of the Vatican and Another Diocese**

**1. In the previous interview, you told us that after the Vatican reviewed the work of Priests for Life, contradicted the unfair complaints of Bishop Zurek, and asked Cardinal Dolan to clear the good name of you and your ministry after Bishop Zurek had publicly called it into question, the Cardinal failed to do that. What did you do next?**

The next thing we did, which was already underway, was to seek canonical recognition from the Vatican as an international association of the faithful.

We are an international ministry, because our team has traveled to dozens of countries over the years, and Priests for Life works on the ground in over 70 of them. Our focus is, without doubt, the United States, but our presence and support in these other countries is strong, and some of the bishops and Cardinals among our advisors are from other nations.

Now here we need to explain a little bit about “associations.”

If you and your friends gather together and do work for a particular cause, you have a right to do that, and nothing more is needed than the agreement and commitment of you and your friends. But civil law also gives you the option to form a “corporation,” which then has certain rights and responsibilities vis-à-vis the state. But that’s optional, of course. You don’t have to form a corporation.

Church law works in a similar way. Anyone in the Church is free to associate with anyone else to carry out the work of the Gospel, including pro-life work. And Church law gives you the option to form various kinds of entities, some of which are called “associations.” These are “canonical” entities – that is, entities recognized by Church law. Besides associations, there are parishes, dioceses, religious communities, and other entities.

So when Priests for Life was first established, [an association was formed under Church law](#) as well as under civil law. In reality, of course, it functioned as one – the same people, the same day to day work. But we were recognized under both civil and canon law. And [we were encouraged by Cardinals at the Vatican](#), both at the beginning [and as the years went on](#).

As time went on, the mission grew and diversified. Responding to the needs of the pro-life movement and the input of those we serve, we formed a whole team of ministry leaders, taking under our wing different efforts like the African-American Outreach led by Evangelist Alveda King, the international outreach led by Marie Smith, and the worldwide Rachel's Vineyard Ministries, the largest effort of healing after abortion.

Because we always retain a team of legal advisors in both Church law and civil law, we made, along the way, the necessary adjustments to accommodate the reality of the work we were doing and the way we were doing it.

So we came to a point where we had outgrown our original structure under both civil and canon law. The civil law adjustments were easy to make. The adjustments in Church law proved far more complicated.

## **2. Did the Vatican help you and Priests for Life navigate this process of seeking international recognition as an association?**

Once we underwent the "Visitation" which I told you about in the previous interview, we were told that we had outgrown the original canonical bylaws under which our canonical recognition had been given, and so needed to update them. This wasn't a negative, by the way; it was simply an observation of fact, and indeed a positive, because we had grown, we were responding to the needs of the movement, and we were being offered assistance in updating our statutes.

We did receive strong encouragement from some experts in Church law and some Vatican Cardinals. Those who know Church law will recognize the name of Cardinal Velasio de Paolis, a world-renowned expert. In my extensive meeting with him, he made clear that the defense of life is a natural obligation as well as a *baptismal* obligation, and the fact we had many lay leaders made a lot of sense. He said that Church law asks associations to identify themselves either as being led by the clergy or by lay people. We were mixed. We even had leaders, like Alveda King, who were not even Catholic. All this reflects the reality of the pro-life movement.

We also received encouragement from Cardinal Stanislaw Rylko, President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity. After extensive communications with him, he urged us to seek recognition under his Council for the Laity. He also wrote, "In our present times there is an urgent need to promote a culture of life and also to undertake direct actions that help protect the life of the weakest, especially the unborn. For that reason the work done by 'Priests for Life' deserves the gratitude and support of the whole Church." - *Cardinal Stanislaw Rylko, President, Pontifical Council for the Laity, Vatican City State, June 7, 2011.*

So as we continued to work with the Canon lawyers, we were told that we either had to change the makeup of our leadership and the focus of our mission to be more "clerical" or, if we kept our lay leadership, would not be able, as a canonical association, to be called "Priests for Life." So it was tricky. Our name is "Priests for Life" and that is an asset in which we had invested much and which was universally recognized. But to meet the needs of the pro-life movement, priests and laity need to work together. Our main focus was the work, not the need to be one or another kind of structure under Canon Law.

Neither solution appealed to us, but the benefit of trying to get recognition as some type of international canonical association was that this would provide the work more protection, beyond the politics of the US Catholic hierarchy and the ill will we had experienced from a handful of bishops.

But just as we were going to advance this process to the next step in Rome, the Congregation for Clergy said that it had recently come to light – a surprise even for them – that to get recognition on the international level, a ministry first had to have recognition from the national bishops’ conference.

And when we asked our national bishops’ conference, the USCCB, about this, they said that they were not currently giving any canonical recognition to any national groups!

### **3. Were you given any additional explanation about how or why this new requirement had just come to light?**

No, and there was not even any conversation about it. I did at one point ask for the help of the President of the Bishops’ Conference, at that time Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, who had on multiple occasions expressed personal encouragement to me for my work.

He wrote to explain that the bishops’ conference did not have any jurisdiction over Priests for Life and was therefore not in a position to either give us any help nor to tell us how to conduct our ministry.

### **4. What then did you decide to do regarding seeking recognition as a canonical association?**

We decided to be like the Knights of Columbus, EWTN, and numerous other well-known ministries, who carry out their work without being a “canonical association” at all. This may sound surprising, but neither of those influential Catholic apostolates are a “canonical entity” at all. As I explained above, that is perfectly OK because it’s totally optional. [Here is how the Knights of Columbus website explained their position in regard to this.](#)

The Congregation for the Clergy was totally respectful of our freedom in this regard. [They indicated in a letter to the bishops](#) that we had made a series of choices over the years as we grew, and that the changes in our structure, and our own decision in this regard, meant that we were not a canonical association any more.

Now it’s easy to get a negative connotation from that. That’s why one of our key advisors and friends, Vatican Cardinal Renato Martino, [wrote a letter to our supporters to explain this development.](#)

The Congregation for Clergy also said in their letter that we deserved credit for the excellent work we do on behalf of human life, and that bishops were free, as they had always been, to either collaborate with us or not.

[Here is a letter that the Congregation for Clergy sent me](#) at the beginning of 2015 regarding these matters. I responded in four parts, outlining our response and some concerns: [Part one.](#) [Part two.](#) [Part three.](#) [Part four.](#)

### **5. Did that finally clear up any negative things that were being said about you and Priests for Life?**

Well our supporters certainly understood all this clearly and our support continued to grow, as it continues to grow today.

But no, the negative attacks continued from some bishops, including Bishop Zurek. Now he and others started to take the words of the letter from the Congregation for Clergy which said that we were not a “Catholic association” and try to imply that ***we were not Catholic***, or not in union with the Church.

As I explained above, by that logic, neither are EWTN or the Knights of Columbus.

Bishop Zurek, however, tried to have it both ways. He started telling people that we were not under the jurisdiction of the Catholic hierarchy.

One would presume, then, that this means he himself, as a member of the hierarchy, did not have any authority to tell our ministry what to do.

Yet he continued to try to tell us what to do, even going so far as to tell a group in Texas that they should not refer to us as “Priests for Life” but rather as “Priests for Life, Inc.” – emphasizing the distinction that we were a civil corporation rather than a Catholic Association.

[I wrote to the Congregation for Clergy to make it clear](#) that we would defend ourselves against any false statements that we were “not Catholic.”

**6. Long ago, as a previous interview indicates, you were told by the Vicar for Priests in Amarillo that it would be wise to seek another diocese because of Bishop Zurek’s ill-will. Many who are reading this history would raise the same point. Did you do so?**

Yes, I certainly did.

Many bishops support our work, and one of them, Bishop Michael Sheridan of Colorado Springs, had been advising us for many years. I approached him to ask if I could be a priest of his diocese, and he expressed, both to me and to Bishop Zurek and to the Vatican, that he was willing to receive me.

It made sense to him, because he was familiar with [my commitment to our mission, its track record of success and its value to the Church](#).

So I made the formal request of him to receive me and of Bishop Zurek to release me. This was in October of 2016. Weeks went by without any response from Bishop Zurek.

I was told by one of my advisors in Rome that Bishop Zurek told the Congregation for Clergy that the letter from Bishop Sheridan ***had been forged by us!***

Then, the response I got from Bishop Zurek was a punishment on a totally unrelated matter, namely, a video I had made about abortion and the elections.

**7. What was the video?**

The video was part of an educational series I was posting on Facebook in the days leading up to the 2016 elections. The video showed an aborted baby and I told the audience that they could prevent violence like that baby had suffered by electing candidates who would protect such babies. [Here is a transcript of what I said in the video](#).

For context, I had been doing public educational work about the elections, and also showing images of aborted babies, from the time I started with Priests for Life in 1993.

As has happened various times over the years, a pastor and pro-life activist who had obtained this baby came to me to arrange for a burial. We were in the process of making those preparations when I took this video. Subsequently, [we carried out the burial of the baby](#) with the assistance of a funeral director and cemetery.

[Praise for the video](#) was immediate and widespread, although Bishop Zurek did not acknowledge that. A close associate of the bishop did acknowledge to me in a phone conversation that the praise and criticism they were receiving was about half and half.

Much of the criticism revolved around my having placed the baby on an “altar” and some started getting into technical complaints about what should or should not be done with an altar. But to the extent that they want to get technical, so can I, and I pointed out that this was a table in our office, not a consecrated altar in a chapel. That table, sometimes used for Mass, was also the place where all my videos in this educational series of election broadcasts were made.

In retrospect, I should have made the baby video in a different location so as to avoid any confusion to begin with.

So the bishop did again what he had done in the past, namely, told me I could not exercise my ministry until the matter was resolved. And neither could the transfer to Colorado Springs happen until this was resolved.

I had done videos of aborted babies before, and I had spoken quite explicitly about the duty to vote prolife before, but these had not elicited this reaction from the bishop until it was in the context of my request to transfer to a more favorable bishop.

#### **8. Did the bishop provide a path to resolving the matter or ask you to do any specific things to make it right?**

First, he asked me to remove the post of the video, which I did after a few days.

Bishop Zurek then publicized that he was launching “an investigation” into the incident. But I was never told what the “investigation” would consist of, and he never bothered to ask me whether his understanding of what happened was correct. In fact, for years afterwards, he persisted in misrepresenting the facts even after I explained them multiple times.

When we buried the baby, as had always been our plan, we sent to the bishop the paperwork showing that the burial had occurred. He never acknowledged it.

In a meeting with the bishop about this incident, my canon lawyer and I asked him what I had to do to have the penalties lifted. He provided no answer. Nor did he give any timetable or a road to resolving the situation. The only specific point was that he said “it would go a long way” if I wrote a letter of apology for the confusion that was created regarding the altar. I had no problem doing this, because the point of the video was not the altar, but the killing of babies, promoted by the Democrats, and the opportunity the voters have to protect these babies. [I subsequently called Msgr. Michael Colwell](#), one of the bishop’s key advisors who was also in the meeting, to get his assistance in writing the letter. He graciously agreed, and was very helpful to me in making sure I included what the bishop expected. I

wrote the letter, posted it publicly [on my website, where it remains to this day](#), and informed the bishop of it. To this day, Bishop Zurek gave no reply and did not even acknowledge the existence of the letter.

In that meeting I said to the bishop, in the hearing of everyone who was there (he had several priests there who assist him), “You want me out of the priesthood altogether, don’t you?” He replied emphatically, “No, never... never.”

[Very shortly after that, I received a letter from him saying that he wanted me dismissed from the priesthood.](#)

In our next interview, we’ll talk about what happened next...

### **Part Five – Political Advocacy for Life, and Threat of Dismissal**

**1. In your previous interview, you pointed out how Bishop Zurek of Amarillo contradicted himself by telling you in a meeting that he would never want you out of the priesthood, and then sending you a letter shortly after that requesting that you seek dismissal from the priesthood, or else he would request it. How did you respond?**

I responded by telling him “No.”

I made it clear that the priesthood is my vocation, and that I have never had a moment’s doubt about that. I told him, therefore, that I would in no way seek to be released from the clerical state.

Over all these years, I have made it clear to him and everyone else that I have made a commitment to live as a priest and also a commitment to devote all my time and energy to defending the unborn from abortion.

If Church authorities want to say that these two things are incompatible, that is their business. But I will not go back on either one of those commitments.

As the months went on, I was not told one way or another whether he followed through on his threat to request the Holy Father to dismiss me from the priesthood. This was in 2017.

I do know that various bishops and Cardinals told the responsible authorities that such a thing should not happen. [Alveda King also wrote a letter to the Pope about the matter](#), and the [Priests for Life Board of Directors wrote a strong letter to Bishop Zurek as well](#).

**2. So in the midst of this, two other things were still unresolved – the penalty for the political video of the aborted baby, and the request to be transferred from the Amarillo Diocese to the Colorado Springs Diocese. How did these matters get resolved?**

We made use, once again, of the procedures that the Church provides for defending our rights, and appealed the bishop’s actions to the Congregation for the Clergy.

We requested that the bishop's penalties be dismissed and that I be authorized to transfer to Colorado Springs so that I could work with a more favorable bishop. The Congregation for the Clergy agreed to take the case and look into it.

[I continued to make the case to the Congregation](#) that in the meantime, the bishop's actions against me were unjust and were causing unnecessary harm and confusion among the faithful.

In the course of working this out, the Congregation for the Clergy had called for a meeting of my team with team and Bishop Zurek. Fr. David Deibel flew to Rome for the meeting to represent me. Bishop Zurek said he would join by phone. When Bishop Zurek got on the phone, he asked to speak to the Cardinal in charge of the Congregation for the Clergy, and asked that my canonical advisor leave the room.

Fr. Dave waited outside the room. Bishop Zurek proceeded to yell and carry on in his complaints about me. After this, the officials came out of the room and told Fr. Dave that there would be no meeting.

The Congregation ended up ruling in my favor and granted my request, declared that I was free of the penalties Bishop Zurek had imposed, and authorized the transfer to Colorado Springs. That was by means of [a decree dated November 11, 2019 \(Congregation for the Clergy, Prot. N. 2019 4532\)](#). [It was explained to the public by one of my canonical consultants.](#)

We welcomed this as a great victory, of course.

### **3. So did the transfer happen?**

No, it did not.

Once the decision was issued, I asked how quickly it could be announced to the public so that we could finally clear our good name and resolve any lingering confusion about who I report to and whether I was in their good graces.

But I was told that before this could happen, Bishop Sheridan and I had to reach "an agreement."

My response was that the agreement was that Bishop Sheridan would be my bishop, and that he would give me my assignment. The understanding between us was that I would continue to live out my calling as a priest who, as National Director of Priests for Life, devotes my ministry to defending the unborn. That was the understanding. That work would include time in the diocese, of course – and the bishop was ready to give me special pro-life responsibilities in the diocese, especially since their previous director of pro-life activities had recently passed away.

But then I was told that the "agreement" that had to be reached with the bishop had to include the agreement of Bishop Zurek. I was told also that the Congregation for Clergy wanted me to spend a significant portion of my time in the Diocese of Colorado Springs.

If I were to do that, of course, I would not be able to carry out the service I have been giving nationwide in my traveling, speaking, and ministering to the pro-life movement.

Bishop Sheridan and I did hammer out an agreement that we thought was workable and incorporated everyone's concerns. He went to Rome and met with the Congregation for the Clergy, but they did not approve the agreement, for reasons that were never explained to me.

#### **4. So what did you do next?**

I did what I had been doing all along – I continued my work, serving priests, deacons, seminarians, and pro-life activists all over the country.

Meanwhile, Bishop Sheridan was approaching the mandatory retirement age of 75.

We were also approaching the elections of 2020. A key issue in the elections was the Supreme Court, and the pro-life movement well understood that keeping President Trump in office was necessary not only to securing pro-life victories in the Supreme Court but also to protecting the freedom of the Church, which Priests for Life and many Catholic dioceses, schools, religious communities and organizations had to defend – all the way to the Supreme Court – against the Obama/Biden administration.

I was asked to serve on the Board of Catholics for Trump as well as to be the National Co-Chair of Pro-life Voices for Trump. I gladly accepted both roles, in which, for instance, I would lead the rosary on weekly prayer calls for Catholic campaign volunteers, and would give inspirational talks to them about the meaning of various liturgical feast days as the election year progressed. It was priestly activity, and I brought many other priests on to these calls to help lead these prayers.

#### **5. Did the bishop object to your political involvement?**

Yes, he complained to the Vatican about it.

[Now I had issued a public letter to all the bishops](#), and also requested permission privately, to make use of the provision that Church law does provide for a priest to be specifically engaged in politics, because sometimes the defense of the Church and basic human rights (like life itself) requires it.

I received no response.

Then my canonical team in Rome said that the Congregation for the Clergy asked me to resign from the “Catholics for Trump” board because priests are not supposed to have an active role in politics.

Now interestingly, the Catholic News Agency had asked me, prior to this request, whether my involvement in the Trump Campaign violated Canon law – and they cited to me the specific canon, with which I was very familiar.

I explained my position as outlined in the open letter.

Then one day at the Congregation for the Clergy, one of the top officials showed my canonical advisor an article from the same Catholic News Agency that showed my participation in the Trump Campaign's advisory boards. These advisory coalitions had a website, and my name and photo were on them.

Both the Trump Campaign and I willingly and quickly complied with the request of the Congregation for the Clergy, because both the Campaign and I respect the norms of the Church and saw no problem if I didn't have an official title or position as an advisory board member. The Campaign and I both knew that I would continue to be vocally supportive of President Trump, and that I would continue to be an invited guest at meetings with election volunteers, lead prayers, provide reflections and so forth.

In fact, I increased my involvement in these activities.

When the Congregation for the Clergy heard that I had complied with their wishes, they expressed quite a bit of joy and gratitude to me.

Interestingly, as soon as [I communicated to the Congregation for the Clergy](#) that the Trump Campaign removed my photo and name from the advisory coalition website, I got a call from the Catholic News Agency about the fact that my name and photo had been removed from that website.

Then they and various Catholic and other media began reporting that I had "resigned from" and "stepped away" from the Trump Campaign.

[I made clear in various interviews](#) that this was not to be seen as distancing myself from President Trump or in any way changing my support for his re-election.

But headlines and soundbites have a power of their own, and that is the impression that was created.

Furthermore, it should be noted that my canonical advisors told me that the Congregation for the Clergy kept using the threat of "dismissal from the priesthood" if I did not comply with this request to not be on the Campaign.

I made it clear to them that I would not in any way change my message. President Trump needed to be re-elected, for the sake of the defense of life, the freedom of the Church, and the good of America.

And I did not change my message. I only intensified it.

So now the joy at the Congregation for the Clergy turned to displeasure, despite the fact that I had fulfilled the specific request I had been given, verified it for them, and received their gratitude.

As a result, Bishop Zurek complained to them again about the support that the most visible pro-life priest in the USA was giving to the most pro-life President of the USA.

And I was told again that they are initiating the process for dismissal from the priesthood.

After all the abuse by Bishop Zurek, I have made it clear that I am not willing to meet with him ([here](#) and [here](#), among others). All my advisors, legal and otherwise, [have told me not to meet with him](#). But the Congregation for the Clergy wants me to meet with him so that he can tell me how they want to proceed in this matter.

Meanwhile, I have other bishops that would be willing to receive me as one of their priests and to whom I would be willing to transfer.

I told them that this matter is going to be decided by the People of God.

## Excerpts from the record of the treatment of Fr. Frank Pavone by Bishop Patrick Zurek

The record in this case speaks for itself, and has been documented in detail for the Congregation for the Clergy over many years. The following is a small sampling of the examples included in it.

1. **Invalid "suspension."** In September of 2011, Bishop Zurek abruptly and publicly asked Fr. Frank Pavone, who was carrying out his fulltime pro-life ministry across the country, to report back to the Amarillo diocese for an unspecified period of time. The matter hit the press immediately, saying Fr. Pavone had been "suspended," because that is the word Bishop Zurek used in his communication of the matter. In a letter to all the bishops that was leaked to the media, Bishop Zurek also said that there were concerns about the finances of Priests for Life.

The next day, responding positively to a request of Fr. Pavone, the Vicar General, Msgr. Harold Waldow, issued a letter saying that Fr. Pavone was **not** suspended, that he was a **priest in good standing**, and that **no specific complaints** of financial mismanagement were being alleged. Yet the secular and Catholic media had already run with the story that he was canonically "suspended" for "financial mismanagement."

The reason it was the Vicar General who issued this clarification is that on the very day Bishop Zurek had designated for Fr. Pavone to report to Amarillo, September 13, 2011, the bishop left the country for Brazil.

Fr. Pavone appealed his action to the Congregation for the Clergy.

2. **Failure to repair harm to reputation.** Bishop Zurek presented a false narrative to all the US Bishops in regard to Fr. Pavone's management of the finances of Priests for Life, and even asked them to discourage contributions to this ministry. This Congregation had to correct the record in its Visitation report (Prot. N. 20133327) *"The financial administration of Priests for Life {Priests for Life} has been publicly called into question. Despite various accounts to the contrary, it is the opinion of the Apostolic Visitor that the*

*Association has been relatively well administered financially... There has been an annual Audit of the Association every year... [T]he work and finances of PFL are in order... [T]he administrative costs of PFL are in keeping with other groups receiving similar funding in the United States."*

Yet despite this report, Bishop Zurek has made no effort to restore the damaged reputation of Fr. Pavone and Priests for Life, which continue eleven years later to receive inquiries about the false rumor.

3. **Failure to understand basic communications.** In the process of the recourse Fr. Frank Pavone made to the Congregation for the Clergy against Bishop Zurek's invalid "suspension" of Fr. Pavone in September of 2011 – a recourse which the Congregation upheld – Fr. Pavone asked the Congregation to make clear to the bishop what the focus and purpose was of any communications between them. Instead of focusing on the topic of the recourse, the bishop was bringing in extraneous matters related to the ministry of Priests for Life.

A [letter from the Congregation of Clergy to Fr. Frank Pavone on 26 March 2012 \(Prot. N. 20120747\)](#) states, *"this Congregation would like to clarify for the benefit of the parties involved that the object of the recourse which you presented before this Dicastery on 7 October 2011 is the rescinding in full of the Decree which His Excellency Bishop Zurek issued in your regard on 6 September 2011. Anything beyond that is excluded from the object of this recourse."*

At the meeting that then took place between Fr. Pavone, Bishop Zurek, and one of the bishop's canonists, the bishop, who had received an identical letter, told Fr. Pavone that that he understood by this letter that Fr. Pavone ***had withdrawn the recourse.***

Clearly, the inability to understand the most basic communications from the Congregation on the most simple matters – even with the help of his canonist -- raises concerns about the reliability of communications from the bishop on more complicated matters.

4. **Unexplained reversals.** In the Spring of 2012 the Congregation for the Clergy upheld Fr. Pavone's recourse against the bishop's actions of September 2011, assuring him that he was not "suspended" and clearing the way for the bishop, if he so chose, to let him resume his fulltime pro-life work. When the decree was issued, Bishop Zurek spoke to Fr. Pavone on the phone, telling him that he had permission to resume his work and broadcasting "without restriction," and affirmed the same in a phone call to EWTN President Michael Warsaw (because one of the restrictions had been on broadcasting).

Yet a week later, in a meeting with Fr. Pavone in the Bishop's office, the bishop reversed himself completely, telling Fr. Frank he did not want him to resume traveling, speaking, or broadcasting, but rather to stay at the secluded location where he had been since the (invalid) suspension. He even told him that he did not want him to celebrate *or even*

*concelebrate* Mass publicly, because, as he explained, people who see him would think of Priests for Life.

After the Congregation's ruling, the bishop also told Fr. Frank -- in person and in writing (letter of May 29, 2012) -- that "I was instructed most firmly by the Archbishop Cleso Morgia Iruzubieta, Secretary of the Congregation of the Clergy, to delay my decision concerning your pro-life ministry until the completion of the visitation" and therefore "I am obliged to wait." After hearing this, Fr. Frank flew to Rome and met with Archbishop Morgia, and asked the Archbishop if what Bishop Zurek had told him was accurate. Archbishop Morgia told him **no, that this was not the case**. On the contrary, the Archbishop said, he had instructed the bishop to "be generous" in his permission to Fr. Frank to continue his Priests for Life work.

A letter from the Congregation for Clergy to Fr. Pavone on 11 July 2012 (Prot. N. 20122139) made clear that Bishop Zurek "is free to grant or to withhold permission for you to minister outside of the Diocese."

5. **Responding to Excardination request with Penalties without resolution.** In 2016, having obtained written consent from a receiving bishop, Fr. Pavone asked Bishop Zurek for excardination from Amarillo. The bishop did not respond, but instead imposed new penalties following a video that Fr. Frank posted of an aborted baby whom he was preparing for burial. Fr. Frank had done this many times before, without receiving any complaint from the bishop.

The bishop told Fr. Frank he had to write a public letter to counteract any scandal that may have been generated, and Fr. Frank, having utilized the help of a priest who was one of the bishop's key advisors to make sure the letter would be acceptable to the bishop, did exactly that and posted it publicly on the Priests for Life website, where it remains today. The bishop never even acknowledged the letter, nor did he indicate what else Fr. Frank had to do to have the penalties lifted.

Meanwhile, Bishop Zurek used this as a reason not to grant excardination. Fr. Pavone was told by a canonical advisor that Bishop Zurek even claimed that the letter that the receiving bishop sent to the Congregation for Clergy, indicating his willingness to receive and support Fr. Pavone, **had been forged**.

6. **Threats of laicization.** At a meeting with Bishop Zurek and a few priests, Fr. Pavone directly asked the bishop, "You want me out of the priesthood altogether, don't you?" Bishop Zurek replied, "Never, never!"

A few weeks later, the bishop sent Fr. Pavone a letter telling him he should request laicization and that if he did not do so, the bishop would request that the Holy See dismiss him from the clerical state. That continues to be the bishop's goal today.

Read the latest developments at <https://frfrankpavone.com/latest-developments.aspx>.