

October 23/24, 2004

Dear Parishioners of St. John and Holy Cross Parishes:

On the weekend of August 7/8 I wrote to you explaining why I deemed it necessary to place Father Paul Coughlin on a temporary administrative leave pending further investigation into complaints received by the diocese. The investigation is now complete. I am writing to inform you of the findings and my decisions. I have spoken with Father Coughlin and his canonical counsel and they acknowledge that the following course of action is in the best interest of everyone involved.

The diocesan investigation found that Father Coughlin failed to follow a 1987 diocesan policy when he did not report information he received in 1989 from a minor who had been sexually abused by Mr. John S. Skinner, Sr., and further, that he failed to take steps to provide assistance to that victim.

The investigation also found that notwithstanding the knowledge of Mr. Skinner's actions, Father Coughlin allowed him to live at St. John's Rectory from 1999 to 2001 with no precautions or notifications. That decision provided Skinner with access to minors, when Skinner attended a youth ministry convention claiming to be a representative of St. John and Holy Cross Parishes. The investigation also established that while living at the rectory and with Father Coughlin's knowledge, Skinner achieved certification in youth ministry by using the name of the parish. Additionally, Skinner expressed an interest in working as a youth minister in the parish but was not accepted. Let me be clear that the diocese did not find any evidence that minors were abused by Skinner in South Portland or at the Youth Convention.

In the course of the meetings that occurred after the Masses in August when Father's temporary administrative leave was announced, some people mentioned that "Father was only doing what Jesus would do" in helping Mr. Skinner. The invitation to him to live in the rectory without safeguards to assure the protection of God's children, was not an appropriate means to assist Mr. Skinner. Moreover, there are some who are saying that Father Coughlin only knew of Mr. Skinner's abuse within the administration of the sacrament of reconciliation. The investigation concluded that Father had knowledge from sources outside the sacrament. My actions are based on external information. It should be noted that even if a priest learned of this kind of information through the sacrament, he is still obligated to protect children while maintaining the integrity of the seal of confession.

The Diocese also reviewed the complaint brought forward two years ago against Father Coughlin which alleged sexual misconduct with a minor in 1985. Even though no new evidence specifically regarding that complaint surfaced, it is now reasonable to believe there was inappropriate physical contact at that time. None of Father Coughlin's actions constituted a criminal offense nor do they invoke the provisions of the Dallas Charter. However, his actions do represent ethical violations.

I deem the following measures commensurate with the seriousness of the ethical violations which have been established. At my request, Father Coughlin has submitted his resignation as pastor of Holy Cross and St. John Parishes effective immediately. I am grateful that Msgr. Michael Henchal will continue as temporary administrator of your parishes until I am able to name a new pastor. Through my discussion with Father Coughlin, he understands that he is not to exercise any public ministry. After a reasonable period of time, I will revisit that decision. Exceptions will be considered in circumstances regarding ministry by Father Coughlin to members of his own family.

Father touched many lives during his years of ministry in South Portland. The good he has done in your midst will certainly remain.

As in August, I realize that you are probably having many different reactions to this announcement. To give you an opportunity to share your thoughts and feelings or ask questions, members of the Diocesan Crisis Team are here to conduct a Listening Session immediately following each Mass this weekend. Your Parish Team is also in place and available to you today and in the weeks ahead. I welcome and urge all who are interested to gather in the Parish Hall after Mass for the Listening Session.

Finally, I urge anyone who may have been sexually abused by clergy or a church representative to make a report to law enforcement and to contact Sr. Rita-Mae Bissonnette, RSR at 773-6471 or Carolyn Bloom at 1-866-829-4437.

I wish I could have been with you in person this weekend, but I was unable to change a commitment to represent the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops at the National Conference of Catechetical Leaders meeting. Please know you are in my prayers and I ask for your prayers for all concerned.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard J. Malone". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Richard J. Malone
Bishop of Portland

