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For more information contact:
Sue Bernard, Communications Director
Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland
773-6471

Restrictions Eased for Retired Priest

After three years of being restricted from ministry, Fr. Paul Coughlin has received permission to exercise priestly ministry, except in Wells, Bangor and South Portland.

Fr. Coughlin was temporarily removed from ministry in August of 2004 in order for the diocese to investigate his association with John S. Skinner, Sr. who had been indicted for sexually assaulting a teenager. Skinner admitted to abusing young people and has since completed serving a prison term.

In 2004, the diocesan investigation found that Fr. Coughlin failed to follow a diocesan policy when, in 1989, he failed to report receiving information from a minor who had been abused by Skinner, and further, that he failed to take steps to provide assistance to that victim.

The investigation also found that with knowledge of Skinner's actions, Fr. Coughlin allowed him to live at the St. John rectory from 1999-2001 with no precautions or notifications. While living at the rectory and with Fr. Coughlin's knowledge, Skinner achieved certification in youth ministry by using the name of the parish. The diocese could find no evidence that minors were ever abused by Skinner during that time.

Coughlin, now 73 years old, tendered his resignation as pastor of Holy Cross and St. John parishes, South Portland at the request of Bishop Richard Malone in October of 2004 due to ethical violations. At that time, the bishop explained the decision would be revisited periodically as required by canon law.

"I believe Fr. Coughlin has had adequate time to reflect on his actions," said Bishop Malone. "As a retired priest, he will not be assigned to any regular ministry, nor will he be allowed to minister in Wells, Bangor or South Portland where he associated with John Skinner and where harm and offense was caused to the communities. His presence could cause divisiveness within these parishes today. Instead, I am allowing him to respond to requests by other parishes to celebrate the Eucharist or perform any other priestly functions on a fill-in basis. He has recently been instructed to notify my office regarding such requests before accepting them."

The bishop has the right and obligation to review this decision periodically.

Like all clergy and church representatives, Fr. Coughlin is obligated to follow the diocesan Code of Ethics which calls on priests and all church representatives to report to

the diocese and civil authorities any claims of sexual abuse, to fulfill the duty to care for minors, and to refrain from ever being alone with a minor.

Background information: Fr. Coughlin is originally from Woburn, Massachusetts. He studied at Maryknoll College, Illinois and Maryknoll Seminary, New York. He was ordained in 1966 and has served as faculty and staff at Maryknoll Junior Seminary in California. His first assignment in Maine was at St. Athanasius and St. John, Rumford in 1970. He also served as Chaplain at Mt. Merici Convent and School, Waterville and Colby College (1971), St. Theresa Parish, Oakland (1973), St. Mary Parish, Augusta (1974), St. Mary Parish, Bangor (1978), and St. Mary Parish, Wells (1987).

Three years ago, the diocese also reviewed a complaint from 2002 against Fr. Coughlin which alleged sexual misconduct with a minor in 1985. Public authorities were aware of this complaint and no criminal charges were ever filed. Although no new evidence specifically regarding the 2002 complaint was found, it was determined it is reasonable to believe that there was inappropriate physical contact at that time. ***None of Fr. Coughlin's actions constituted a criminal offense nor did those actions invoke the provisions of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People.***)