

August 7/8, 2004

Dear Parishioners of Holy Cross and St. John Parishes:

It is with great sadness that I address this letter to you. Based on information received by the diocese, I have deemed it necessary to place Father Paul Coughlin on a temporary administrative leave pending further investigation.

My reason for taking this action is two-fold. As you may have learned through the media, Mr. John Skinner, Sr. of Stonington was recently indicted for sexually assaulting a teenager between 1990 and 1994. At that time Mr. Skinner served as a youth ministry volunteer at St. Mary of Lourdes Parish in Lincoln. In the course of the investigation of Mr. Skinner it has come to light that Father Coughlin has had a long association with Mr. Skinner. The complaint brought to my attention is that during the course of his acquaintance with Mr. Skinner, Father Coughlin may have placed a minor at risk. Additionally, Father allowed Mr. Skinner to live with him for a period of time at St. John's Rectory. Let me be very clear: **this information does not allege any claims of sexual abuse of a minor by Father Coughlin.** Father's removal is an administrative action in order to facilitate further investigation by the diocese.

Because of this recent information, I am re-examining an earlier complaint which did allege sexual misconduct with a minor by Father Coughlin in 1985. Public authorities brought this claim to the attention of the Diocese in 2002; the Diocese cooperated in this investigation and conducted an investigation of its own. The results were presented to the independent Diocesan Review Board, and at that time, the claim could not be substantiated. No civil charges were filed.

During Father Coughlin's leave he will not be allowed to exercise any priestly ministry and he is further prohibited from any unsupervised contact with minors. I am grateful that Monsignor Michael Henchal has agreed to serve as temporary administrator of Holy Cross and St. John's Parishes, in addition to his other duties as Pastor of St. Bartholomew's Parish, Cape Elizabeth. I wish to thank Monsignor Henchal for his generosity in accepting these added responsibilities. I am confident that you, the parishioners, will work with him during these difficult times.

Finally, I urge anyone who may have been sexually abused by clergy or church representative to make a report to law enforcement and to contact Sr. Rita-Mae Bissonnette, RSR at 773-6471. I remain firmly committed to helping those who have been harmed by anyone presenting himself or herself as a church representative. Also anyone who has relevant information regarding Father Coughlin should contact Deacon John Brennan, Diocesan Investigator at 773-6471.

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, there will be a Listening Session immediately following each Mass this weekend. The session will be facilitated by members of the Diocesan Crisis Team (at Holy Cross: Peter McNelis and Ann Peacock; and at St. John: Peter Donnelly and Pam Smith). A Parish Team of fellow parishioners has also been formed and these people will be available to you for support today and in the weeks ahead. Again, I welcome and urge all who are interested to gather in the Parish Hall after Mass for the Listening Session.

I am sorry I could not be with you in person this weekend. Please know you are in my prayers and I ask for your prayers for all concerned.

Sincerely in Christ,

Most Reverend Richard J. Malone  
Bishop of Portland