

Excommunication in Phoenix

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Catholic Church Excommunicates 2 Mesa Priests

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By Lawn Griffiths, Tribune

Two Valley Catholic priests, Monsignor Dale Fushek and the Rev. Mark Dippre, have been excommunicated by Bishop Thomas Olmsted for defying his order to not engage in public ministry, an activity that was deemed out of accord with the Roman Catholic Church.

Thirteen months ago, the priests, who had served together in the 1990s at St. Timothy's Catholic Community in Mesa, founded the nondenominational Praise and Worship Center, which meets Sundays at the Fiesta Fountains Reception Center, 1316 S. Longmore, Mesa.

Fushek was put on paid leave of absence in late 2005 after he was indicted on 10 misdemeanors related to sexual misconduct across almost a decade while he led the Life Teen program.

The Diocese of Phoenix Monday made public the bishop's order. The statement, posted on the diocesan Web site (diocesephoenix.org), said, "Fushek and Dippre have incurred the censure of excommunication because they have chosen to be in schism with the Catholic Church by establishing and leading an opposing ecclesial community known to the public as the Praise and Worship Center."

The statement said the two men had "consistently refused to comply with explicit directions by Bishop Olmsted to discontinue engaging in public ministry."

The two priests were informed by letter a week ago of the bishop's action and given a week to respond before the diocese would make it public, said Jim Dwyer, diocesan spokesman. He said, for more than a year, the bishop has sought reconciliation with the two men in asking them to abandon the ministry that regularly draws 250 to 300 each Sunday to the services. Fushek and Dippre speak at the 90-minute services that are rich in music, but do not include religious sacraments like communion or baptism. The pastors have repeatedly said their services are not to be considered as "Catholic" in any way.

Dwyer, on Monday, said the action was taken in consultation with the Vatican.

“As excommunicated priests, Fushek and Dippre cannot participate in the celebration of the sacrifice of the Holy Eucharist or in any other ceremonies of worship,” the decree said. “They are also prohibited from celebrating or receiving any of the sacraments.” They will also forfeit the “benefits of dignity, office or any function they previously acquired in the Catholic Church.” That would include Fushek’s honorary title of “monsignor.”

The decree said the bishop continues to express his “grave concern for Catholics who may be misled or confused by the actions” of the two clergymen.

“They always claim that they are not doing something in opposition to any denomination, but they are always holding their worship services at a time that coincides with a lot of Catholic Masses,” Dwyer said. The center’s services begin at 10 a.m. Sundays.

Jan and Stan Nicpon of Tempe, members of St. Andrew the Apostle Catholic Church in Chandler, have been attending the Praise and Worship Center since it began in November 2007, as well as their parish. “I go to Mass for my sacraments, and I go to Praise and Worship for my Christian fulfillment,” Stan Nicpon said. “It is just a good community feeling.” He said those who come seem unfazed by the criminal allegations against Fushek, except that the case “keeps going on and on without any kind of resolution.”

As for Jan Nicpon, the center is “not a church. It is kind of a fulfillment beyond church. It is just a lot of great music that kind of fills you with a good spirit, inspiration and hope — a lot of hope.”

Dwyer said the pensions of Fushek and Dippre are not affected because those are legal entitlements. The excommunication does not take away the title of priest from the two pastors, although such actions may have been started. “It is a confidential process I am not privy to,” he said.

Fushek is awaiting trial in San Tan Justice of the Peace Court in Chandler on seven misdemeanor counts involving five alleged victims; three counts were dropped, two because one man who brought a complaint has died. Early this year, Olmsted cut off the salary that Fushek had been paid while awaiting resolution of the legal charges against him. The bishop said he took that action because of Fushek’s defiance of his orders.

A Maricopa Superior Court judge will soon rule whether Fushek is entitled to five separate jury trials or one in which all five men may bring their complaints.