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Incident with Minor Led Priest to Resign

By Wilma Norton
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The Rev. James E. Russo, who resigned last weekend as pastor of St. Michael's the Archangel Catholic Church, once had "an episode of misconduct" with a minor, the bishop said Wednesday.

Bishop Robert N. Lynch released a two-sentence statement about Russo's departure.

It said, "An episode of misconduct occurred many years ago involving Father Russo and a person who had not yet reached the age of 18. Since the person in question has requested total and complete anonymity, I am not at liberty to discuss this matter further."

Lynch is out of town and could not be reached for comment.

Joseph Mannion, spokesman for the diocese, said he could not elaborate on the statement.

"What it says is what it says," Mannion said.

Russo cited "emotional items" in his resignation, read at Mass on Saturday and Sunday.

He had been pastor of St. Michael's for 10 years, following assignments at Blessed Trinity in St. Petersburg and St. Patrick's in Largo. Russo, 51, also held several powerful positions within the diocese. He was the long-time president of Catholic Charities and was the diocese's head of worship for many years, the person who helped guide liturgical policy in the diocese.

Russo is the fourth priest in the Catholic Diocese of St. Petersburg to leave his position in the past seven months because of a relationship-related scandal.

The diocese serves about 400,000 Catholics in 73 parishes in Pinellas, Hillsborough, Pasco, Citrus and Hernando counties.

Last fall, the Rev. Patrick Clarke was placed on leave after Lynch learned Clarke had been secretly married for 15 years.

A few days after Clarke's marriage became public, the diocese released details of the August resignation of the Rev. Simeon Gardner, pastor of St. Mary's Catholic Church in Lutz. Diocese officials discovered that over more than three years Gardner had diverted at least \$225,000 in church money to a man with whom he had been sexually involved.

A week after those allegations surfaced, Lynch revealed that the Rev. William Lau of Blessed Trinity had resigned in June after Lynch learned that Lau had engaged in sexual misconduct with a minor several years earlier.

Lau went to a facility that treats clergy with various disorders, including sexual misconduct, alcoholism and drug dependency. Lynch said Lau would undergo "a long period of evaluation and assessment."

He also said then that it was highly improbable that Lau, 46, would ever be reassigned as a parish priest.

Lynch's statement Wednesday made no reference to where Russo is now or if he will be reassigned.

Russo is no longer at St. Michael's. His father said Tuesday that Russo is out of town and could not be reached.

People who had been Russo's parishioners said Wednesday that they are distraught over his troubles.

Anne Engstrom, a 17-year member of St. Michael's, said Russo converted her husband to Catholicism.

"We're devastated," she said. "He was the best homilist I ever heard. He was absolutely fabulous. You came home with a message every week. He never had a written homily, he just did it off the top of his head."

She said she wasn't going to listen to any speculation about why Russo left. "It's sad," Mrs. Engstrom said. "It had to be very serious for him to leave because he was really loved."

Carol Foley of Largo said she has known Russo since his days at St. Patrick's at least 15 years ago. She kept in touch with the priest, she said, and he performed her daughter's marriage ceremony about a year ago.

"Certainly, this is tragic," she said. "I've had nothing but positive experiences with Father Russo. He's been a dynamic leader and somebody who got things done."

His resignation and the circumstances surrounding it are sad, Mrs. Foley said. "We all have to pray for him and all the people who are going to be hurt by this." - Staff writer Jen Pilla contributed to this report.

Abstract (Document Summary)

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