

Bishop says anti-abortion activist not facing charges

by [David Gibson](#)

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(RNS) Just days after prominent anti-abortion activist Rev. Frank Pavone was ordered to suspend his work as head of Priests for Life, Pavone and his bishop, Patrick J. Zurek of Amarillo, Texas, are seeking a way out of the tense standoff.

Pavone told reporters in Amarillo that he was seeking to be "incardinated," or authorized to work, in another diocese, presumably one where he could continue his 18-year role as head of the New York-based Priests for Life.

"I do not foresee myself staying incardinated in Amarillo," Pavone said Wednesday (Sept. 14) before celebrating Mass at St. Mary's Cathedral in Amarillo. "It's a sensitive issue. We're working it out behind the scenes."

At the same time, church officials in Amarillo sought to tone down the harsh rhetoric that Zurek had used in a Sept. 9 letter to U.S. bishops in which he referred to questions about the group's finances, and said Pavone's work has "inflated his ego with a sense of self-importance."

On Thursday, Monsignor Harold Waldow, the diocese's vicar of clergy and Zurek's point man in negotiations with Pavone, sent a letter to Priests for Life clarifying that Pavone remains "a priest in good standing." The bishop's suspension order, he said, "does not mean that Father Pavone is being charged with any malfeasance or being accused of any wrongdoing."

"I must say every time I've had conversations with Father Frank and asked him to do whatever the bishop might be requiring ... he's always been very positive in his response," Waldow told the Amarillo Globe-News

on Tuesday.

He added that Pavone and Zurek "are both very strong personalities." Waldow noted that many other bishops support Zurek and share his concerns about Pavone's largely independent oversight of Priests for Life's annual \$10 million budget.

But Pavone has a loyal and influential following in the hierarchy as well, and his international standing as an anti-abortion crusader has brought him the kind of popular renown -- and devotion -- that Zurek cannot match.

The Center For Bio-Ethical Reform, an anti-abortion group known for displaying graphic signs at anti-abortions demonstrations, announced it would picket parishes in Amarillo in a "Free Father Frank!" campaign to release Pavone "from what amounts from ecclesiastical `house arrest,'" as Gregg Cunningham, the group's executive director, put it.

"A global battle is raging within Catholicism between clerics who believe the church should do more to fight abortion and those who believe the church should do less," he said. "With Bishop Zurek's confused and confusing decision to sideline Father Pavone's pro-life ministry, the fault line in this divisive dispute now runs directly through the center of Amarillo."

Pavone told Catholic News Agency that he would consider starting a religious order or society -- something akin to the Franciscans, Jesuits or the lay movement Opus Dei -- if he could not find a bishop willing to back his full-time anti-abortion advocacy.

On Friday, Pavone sent a private message to supporters thanking them for their support, adding that he was not discouraged as he continues fighting abortion from his home in Amarillo.

"I'm here because cooperating with church authority at this moment is the best way to preserve the mission I lead to save these children, a mission aimed precisely at increasing the church's awareness of and response to this holocaust."