

Vatican expels Newark priest Michael Fugee from priesthood

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(RNS) Acting with uncustomary speed, the Vatican expelled a New Jersey man from the priesthood for repeatedly defying a lifetime ban on ministry to children.

Michael Fugee, 53, who attended youth retreats and heard confessions from minors despite signing a court-sanctioned decree forbidding such activities, is no longer a priest, said Jim Goodness, a spokesman for the Archdiocese of Newark.

The Vatican typically takes a year or longer to expel priests, a process known as laicization. In some cases, the procedure drags on for several years.

Fugee's removal comes just four months after the Bergen County Prosecutor's Office agreed to drop criminal charges against him in exchange for his expulsion. He remains under lifetime supervision by the prosecutor's office.

Asked about the swift pace of Fugee's removal, Goodness said the former priest's petition for laicization was "given a good amount of attention when it was submitted."

Fugee's interactions with children, first reported last April, led to national criticism of Newark Archbishop John J. Myers, who had repeatedly defended the priest and returned him to ministry after a molestation conviction was overturned on a technicality.

Months later, Pope Francis appointed a co-archbishop for the archdiocese. Myers maintains his handling of Fugee and other priests credibly accused of sexual abuse was unrelated to the pope's decision.

Fugee's troubles stretch back to 2001, when he admitted under police questioning that he fondled the genitals of a teenage boy, that it sexually excited him, and that he recognized it was a "violation." Two years later, a jury convicted him of criminal sexual contact, and he was sentenced to five years' probation.

The conviction was later reversed by an appellate court, which ruled the trial judge gave improper instructions to jurors.

The ban on ministry to children, enshrined in a 2007 memorandum of understanding signed by the archdiocese's vicar general, required Fugee to undergo counseling for sex offenders and to stay away from children. The archdiocese agreed to ensure the terms.

Because of the court reversal, Fugee was not required to register as a Megan's Law offender.

Mark Crawford, the New Jersey director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, an advocacy and support group, called Fugee's expulsion from the priesthood "long overdue."

"This should have happened years and years ago," Crawford said. "If the archbishop was truly open and transparent, Fugee would never have been returned to ministry. At least now he will be monitored by professionals, and we will no longer have the archbishop's empty promise that Fugee will be supervised. It's crystal clear he was never supervised."

Fugee, ordained a priest in the Archdiocese of Newark in 1994, was serving at the Church of St. Elizabeth in Wyckoff when he became close with the 14-year-old alleged victim and the boy's mother. Fugee spent evenings at the teen's home and traveled with him on vacation.

During several visits, Fugee engaged in wrestling matches with the boy, groping him in the process, prosecutors charged.

After Fugee's return to the priesthood, Myers named him chaplain at St. Michael's Medical Center in Newark without informing hospital officials of the criminal case. When *The Star-Ledger* informed the officials of the priest's past, they demanded his removal.

Fugee later served as co-director of the Office of Continuing Education and Ongoing Formation of Priests, a position at the archdiocese's headquarters in Newark.

At the same time, however, his contact with children continued. He went on youth retreats, attended youth ministry meetings, and heard confessions from minors at St. Mary's Parish in Colts Neck and at Holy Family Church in Nutley. He also traveled to a Canadian shrine with youth group members from both churches.

The prosecutor's office criminally charged him in May with seven counts of violating a judicial order. Six months later, Bergen County Prosecutor John Molinelli dropped the charges on the conditions that Fugee agree to laicization and that he submit to lifetime monitoring and a host of other restrictions.

The controversy led to the gravest crisis of Myers' tenure in Newark, with calls for his resignation from lawmakers, parishioners and advocates for sex abuse victims. The pastor and two youth ministers at the Colts Neck church were removed from their positions, and the vicar general, Msgr. John Doran, was reassigned.

Goodness said he doesn't know where Fugee is living now.