July 5, 2007 - Child molester will always be priest -- in theological sense
BY SUSAN HOGAN/ALBACH Religion Reporter, Chicago Sun-Times (IL)

The Rev. Daniel McCormack, convicted child molester, will always in a theological sense remain a priest, even if the Archdiocese of Chicago succeeds in removing him from ministry, according to church law experts.

"When a priest is ordained, they receive a special gift of the Holy Spirit that's indelible," said Monsignor Thomas Green, a professor of canon law at the Catholic University of America.

But McCormack wouldn't be able to function as a priest. He couldn't lead a parish or portray himself as a clergyman. And he wouldn't be the responsibility of the archdiocese, Green said.

After McCormack pleaded guilty this week to five counts of aggravated sexual criminal assault for molesting boys, the archdiocese said it would seek his "separation" from the ordained priesthood.

That can happen two ways. McCormack can voluntarily or forcibly be "laicized," or removed from the clerical state. Approval must come from the Holy See.

The archdiocese said that only three of its priests have been laicized for reasons including sexual abuse of minors. It's seeking to laicize one other priest besides McCormack, spokeswoman Colleen Dolan said. She declined to name the other priests.

Many priests are laicized voluntarily, usually because they want to marry, according to the U.S. Bishops Conference. The church can initiate the process when a priest's life is deemed incompatible with ordination.

The process gained momentum after public pressure from an explosion of predator priest scandals. In 2002, U.S. bishops adopted a historic charter and vowed to remove any priest guilty of a single "credible" offense of child abuse.

Many of those predatory priests were not laicized because they were aged or infirm, the bishops conference said.

Cardinal Francis George has been widely criticized for his handling of McCormack, who served at St. Agatha parish and Our Lady of the Westside School.