

2-5-08 - Diocese disciplines former area priest

By Hoa Nguyen, Staff Writer, Stamford Advocate (CT)

The Diocese of Bridgeport has stripped the Rev. Michael Moynihan of his priestly authority after learning from a New York tabloid that the former pastor of St. Michael Church in Greenwich shares a Manhattan apartment with another man, a spokesman said.

"This came as a complete surprise," diocese spokesman Joseph McAleer said. "The New York Post contacted me and we had absolutely no idea. We were able to confirm what The New York Post told us independently and acted quickly."

The Post yesterday reported that Moynihan has been sharing a one-bedroom apartment with Michael Fawcett, a former music director at St. Michael Church, for a decade.

Moynihan and Fawcett could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Moynihan was forced to resign last year from St. Michael amid allegations of financial mismanagement, including that he kept two "off-the-books" bank accounts secret from the diocese.

Although at the time, there were rumors of a relationship between Moynihan and Fawcett, both denied it, and the diocese found no evidence to corroborate the rumors, officials have said, adding that Moynihan was told to stay away from Fawcett to prevent the appearance of impropriety.

Diocese officials said The Post contacted them last week. After confirming that Moynihan leased the apartment at 300 E. 40th St. where Fawcett lives, Bishop William Lori decided on Friday he could no longer allow Moynihan to function as a priest, diocese officials said. Lori's decision was made public yesterday after The Post published its story.

The delay in making the information public raised eyebrows among some who knew Moynihan.

"The diocese should issue a statement to the people in Greenwich," said Judy Moretti, a Pemberwick resident whose daughter was married at St. Michael Church. "The diocese, if they had spoken to The Post and given them a statement, we should have heard at the same time."

The diocese made a judgment call, McAleer said.

"This is an unfortunate announcement of a controversial nature that we didn't think families of the parish would want sprung on them at Sunday Mass," McAleer said.

From 1982 through 1984, Moynihan was a chaplain and teacher at Trinity Catholic School, which was then called Stamford Catholic High School.

After leaving the school, Moynihan spent the next five years studying, first at the Navy Chaplain School, in Newport, R.I., and later doing graduate studies in canon law in Rome.

Moynihan returned to Connecticut in 1990 as a priest at St. John Church in Stamford. He was named pastor of St. Michael Church in 1993.

In the year since accusations of financial mismanagement were made, many of Moynihan's supporters at St. Michael Church have stayed loyal to him. But yesterday's revelations that Moynihan has been living with another man caught several off-guard.

"Father Michael, who were you?" Moretti asked. "It seems as if he was living a life that was two lives, and it's just really sad."

June Crabtree, a St. Michael Church parishioner who read The Post article yesterday, said she was torn by the revelations.

"My heart is broken," she said. "I would hate to say I wouldn't support him because I'm very fond of him, but this is a shock."

Other Moynihan supporters came to his defense, saying The Post article didn't prove anything.

"I scratch my head and say, 'OK, he's living with another man in New York, is that criminal?' I don't think so," said Chris Tella, a Riverside resident who said Fawcett may just have been a roommate. "It's disappointing to hear that someone in the media intrudes into someone's private life and then tells the diocese. I don't see the value in that when, clearly, the man does so much good."

In the year since he left St. Michael Church, Moynihan has been a volunteer chaplain at the State University of New York Maritime College where he regularly presided over Mass. Lori's decision means Moynihan can no longer act as a chaplain, although SUNY spokeswoman Jane Bartnett called the departure a "leave of absence."

"Actually, at his request, he has taken a leave of absence," she said, declining to comment further.

The Rev. Monsignor J. Peter Cullen, who took over as pastor of St. Michael Church from Moynihan, said he is looking forward to the release of a report being finalized by the diocese and its auditors detailing the church's finances under Moynihan's tenure.

"We have been hoping we would be in receipt of the financial report very soon," he said. "All of this has happened and taken everyone by surprise."