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Local Catholic Church gets priest with troubled past

The Bakersfield Californian

Posted: Monday June 6th, 2005, 11:15 PM
Last Updated: Monday June 6th, 2005, 11:22 PM

A priest scheduled to begin his tenure at a large Catholic Church in Bakersfield this month left his last amid allegations of inappropriate sexual behavior and misuse of church money.

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The Rev. Jean-Michael Lastiri will be joining St. Philip the Apostle Church or Monsignor Ronald Swett confirmed Monday.

Lastiri left St. Patrick's Parish in Merced in July 2004 after parishioners accused participating in sexual conversations on Internet chat sites and seeking gay Web, the *Merced Sun-Star* reported in May.

Lastiri, who served at St. Patrick's for about 11 years, also is suspected of misusing money for personal expenses, the *Sun-Star* reported. Lastiri is currently under review for his spending.

Lastiri could not be reached for comment.

Swett said all questions should be referred to the Diocese of Fresno. No one else was reached for comment at the diocese.

Bishop John Steinbock could not be reached for comment on Monday.

In July 2004, in a statement published in the *Modesto Bee*, Steinbock called Lastiri's actions compulsive and sent him to St. Luke's Institute for spiritual counseling.

"Fr. Lastiri apologizes for any pain he has caused the community and wishes to seek the appropriate help for his compulsive behavior so that he may return, with God's grace, to full ministry as a good and faithful priest," Steinbock wrote in July.

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Troubled priest's plans change

Bishop's letter cites man's addiction to 'the fantasy world of the Internet'

By AMY HILVERS, Californian staff writer
e-mail: ahilvers@bakersfield.com

Posted: Sunday June 12th, 2005, 9:25 PM

Last Updated: Sunday June 12th, 2005, 11:49 PM

A priest with a troubled past, who was to join a Bakersfield church, has asked not to be sent here after all.

Monsignor Ronald Swett told the St. Philip the Apostle Church parish Sunday that the Rev. Jean-Michael Lastiri would not be coming because he didn't want "to be the cause of division and condemnation in the parish."

Lastiri left St. Patrick's Parish in Merced last year amid allegations of having sexual conversations on the Internet and misusing church money, the *Merced Sun-Star* reported in May. Lastiri was to join the Bakersfield church this week.

Swett read a letter from Bishop John Steinbock of the Diocese of Fresno, to the parish. Both Steinbock and Swett said the media had sensationalized and misrepresented the situation.

"Because of the ferment and division his appointment is causing in the area, Fr. Lastiri himself has asked me not to be sent to St. Philip's. He does not want to be the cause of division and condemnation in the parish," Steinbock's letter said.

"Unfortunately, a good deal of gossip and misinformation have distorted public perception and seeks to frame Fr. Lastiri's appointment within the context of the clergy sexual abuse scandal. This is simply not the case."

His problem had nothing to do with children, Steinbock wrote, adding that Lastiri had gone through intense therapy.

"The issue with Fr. Lastiri has been one of addiction, not criminal sexual behavior. It has been addiction both to the fantasy world of the Internet and to the spending of money."

Swett addressed the parish, saying this week had been the most difficult in his 38 years as a priest and that his integrity, credibility and sanity had been called into question.

<http://bakersfield.com/local/v-print/story/5580603p-5551100c.html>

6/14/2005

Reading from a written statement, he said he received "a few comments filled with a vitriol and hatred unlike any I have ever received as a pastor and unlike I would expect from anyone who bears the name of Christian."

Swett said he did not speak earlier because he did not want to speak through the media and he wanted to address parishioners in church. He said he and Steinbock thought the church would be a welcoming community to a "fallen priest" who sought help and was ready to return to the ministry.

"Perhaps being a welcoming community is more easily accomplished when we feel comfortable with the Gospel rather than when we are challenged by that same Gospel," he said.

Swett urged prayers for Lastiri.

"Despite how he may have been presented in the media this past week, he is a good, caring priest who has been graced by God to deal with his compulsive and addictive behavior. I think we lose something in his not coming to be with us."

Some parishioners declined to comment, and some criticized the media reports.

Others felt Lastiri deserved a chance.

"I think it's too bad that we condemned him before we heard anything about it," Bea Mahlmann said. "I think he could have helped people who were having struggles of their own."

Diana Wilson felt that once Lastiri confessed, his sins were forgiven.

"I feel he was sort of driven out of Kern County," she said. "Once you're forgiven for your sins, your sins are reconciled. You shouldn't be ostracized for that."