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ALERT

St. Francis Xavier removes pastor after report of 'inappropriate contact'

Seaborn Larson

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A longtime Jesuit leader in Missoula was removed from St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church last week after admitting to "inappropriate contact" with a woman here just days after she made the allegation, church officials have confirmed.

The Rev. Rich Perry, who became pastor of Missoula's Jesuit church in 2001 and took the role of associate pastor in recent years, has been relocated to the Sacred Heart Jesuit Center in Los Gatos, California, a retirement community for church

leaders accused of misconduct, the Rev. Joseph Carver told the Missoulian in an interview Tuesday.

"It was a woman who came forward and said it was inappropriate contact," Carver said. "Then he (Perry) was confronted and acknowledged this was accurate."

Tracey Primrose, a spokesperson for the Jesuits West province, said Tuesday in an email that Perry had been contacted and was unavailable for an interview.

However, in the email, Primrose took exception to some of Carver's points to the Missoulian, specifically that Perry had admitted to the incident.

"Fr. Perry was not given any information about the allegation, and he did not admit to 'inappropriate contact' or anything else," Primrose said in the email.

On Tuesday, Carver said the woman came forward on Oct. 2 and Perry was confronted the same day. Perry was relocated by the Jesuits West Province, which Carver said was the church's policy, on Oct. 7. Parishioners were made aware at Mass last week of Perry's removal.

Carver said the woman who came forward was not a subordinate, but declined to further describe the woman's relationship with Perry or whether she was a member of the congregation, saying only that she was a member of the Missoula community.

Primrose also disputed Carver's characterization of the Jesuit Center in California, describing the facility as its health care and retirement community. However, the Center for Investigative Reporting **reported** in December abusive clergy once housed at the Cardinal Bea House on Gonzaga University's campus had been moved to the Los Gatos facility. Two months before the Center's report, The San Jose Mercury News also **identified** the Sacred Heart Jesuit Center as a retirement home where priests have been sent following accusations of abuse.

The allegations against Perry have not been reported to Missoula authorities because, Carver said, the actions did not rise to the level of criminal. Missoula Police Sgt. Travis Welsh said Perry had not been arrested or charged with such a crime.

"There's nothing illegal," Carver said. "There's a difference between illegal and immoral behavior."

In an undated letter to St. Joseph School parents, Principal Christina Vierra McGill alerted parents to Perry's removal, and mentions that students have been notified as well. Perry had been a member of the Missoula Catholic Schools **board**.

"As a cradle Catholic, and as someone who has dedicated the majority of my professional career to Catholic schools, this news has come as both a shock and intense disappointment," McGill wrote in the letter to parents, a copy of which was provided to the Missoulian.

In the letter, McGill emphasizes the allegations do not involve any children.

She did not respond to requests for comment Tuesday.

McGill also wrote in her letter, "We pray for the victims," in the plural form. Carver, however, said "only one woman has come forward."

References to Perry have already been removed from St. Francis' website. But he was long the face of the Jesuits in Missoula, becoming pastor of the church in 2001. In 2002 he defended the church as the global sex abuse cover-up was unfolding.

"When I pray at Mass, I pray for the priests who are guilty, for the priests who have no allegations against them but who are tarred with the same brush, for the leaders of the church," Perry **told the Missoulian then**. "And I pray for the people in the pews, that somehow we can restore the credibility they have in the church."

Perry had been a periodic contributor to the Missoulian as a rotating writer for the "Community of Faith" column that runs in Saturday's Montana section.

Perry did not respond to a direct email sent Monday from the Missoulian to his personal email account.

Primrose said the province's protocol is to automatically remove the Jesuit from the ministry when an investigation takes place as a protocol to safeguard the community. She also said the accused is not informed of the details of the allegation or the identity of the accuser until the investigation is completed.

"To do so might compromise the investigation," she said.

Carver acknowledged the shock to the community regarding the allegations because Perry served the church and Missoula's Catholic schools for nearly 20 years.

"There's an enormous amount of good Rich did over the many years he served here," Carver said Tuesday.

He added it was important for the church to move swiftly after Perry's admission.

"It certainly is the delay in the past that has caused such harm," Carver said.

"I think we're called upon as Christians to do the right thing," said Colin McCormack, parish administrator. "I think we did the right thing here."

Carver provided the Missoulian with a written statement notifying parishioners to the removal, as well. It reads:

"Last Saturday the Jesuit provincial, Fr. Scott Santarosa, missioned Fr. Rich Perry to the Jesuit Center in Los Gatos, California. This decision was made in light of serious allegations against Fr. Perry concerning some of his relationships with adult women. In

keeping with province policy, Fr. Perry has been removed from ministry; he departed for Los Gatos last Monday.

"I want to stress that none of these allegations is related to minors. In sharing this news, I want you to know, on behalf of the Jesuits, how personally and deeply sorry I am for the events that led to Fr. Perry's removal. I realize how damaging it is when any one of my brothers fails to live out our call.

"We pray for healing in our community, we pray for Fr. Perry, but most of all, we pray for any person who has been hurt because of his actions. The protection and care of every parish member is, and continues to be, first and foremost for all of us who minister here at St. Francis Xavier.

"I realize what an extreme shock this is to all of us in the community. Should anyone need to speak further about this matter, I will be available to meet with you in the coming weeks."



Rich Perry

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