

EMBARGOED UNTIL SUNDAY MARCH 3, 2002

March 2, 2002

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DIOCESE OF ORANGE TAKES STEP TO ENFORCE NEW POLICY REGARDING
SEXUAL ABUSE AMONG CHURCH MINISTERS

ORANGE, CA – March 2, 2002 – The Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange today announced that Father Michael Pecharich, Pastor of San Francisco Solano Catholic Church in Rancho Santa Margarita has resigned as pastor and will be leaving public ministry at the request of Bishop Tod Brown. This action has been taken to enforce new policies against sexual misconduct adopted by the Diocese in January of this year. The policies are retroactive to any case of proven or admitted misconduct with a minor.

Nineteen years ago Father Pecharich admitted to and received counseling for sexual misconduct. Although there have been no further instances of misconduct by Father Pecharich, nor any new accusations, the Diocese has taken the position that any priest who was ever involved in this kind of behavior cannot serve in ministry.

According to Bishop Tod Brown, "Speaking personally, and on behalf of the entire Diocese of Orange, we deeply regret having to take this action. However, we have made a promise to the community that we will enforce our policies. If there were some other path we could have taken with regards to Father Pecharich's specific case we would have taken it."

In a statement published to the congregation, Father Pecharich stated:

Dear Parishioners, Dear Friends:

Over the years of this parish's history, I've written many letters to you, none with so heavy a heart.

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Nineteen years ago I transgressed personal boundaries of an adolescent. The resulting sense of damage done to another led me into a very painful necessary journey of deep regret, soul searching, therapeutic counseling and eventual growth toward emotional maturity. I am truly sorry for the harm caused.

Although this matter was addressed previously, the Church needs now to respond differently. The seriousness of this one complaint has led to a decision this past week that I will no longer remain in public ministry. Bishop Tod Brown has requested and received my letter of resignation as pastor of San Francisco Solano parish effective March 4, 2002. Heartbroken, I accept the decision.

Our life together here now ends abruptly, and my concern for you remains primary. Only by moving through the pain of such an ending can you come to new life as a parish. This is about Lent and Easter...so I ask that our faith in Jesus the Christ and Good Shepherd now bring you peace and carry you forward. I ask your support of the wonderful parish staff, the Bishop of the Diocese, the interim administrator, Father Craig Butters, and the eventual new pastor. With time may you come to love him as you have loved me.

The past 12+ years have been the most challenging and the most fulfilling years of my ministry as a priest. You have taught me much about living the Gospel, about pastoring and about the meaning of service...it has been a most privileged and grace-filled experience. I love you, ask for your prayers and assure you of mine.

May the Light of Christ continue to guide us along whatever paths lead to the Kingdom.

Father Michael Pecharich

Father Michael Pecharich studied for the ministry in Southern California and was ordained in March, 1973. He served as associate pastor at St. Edwards Church in Dana Point and San Antonio de Padua in Anaheim Hills. He was Vicar of Clergy for the Diocese until he was appointed by Bishop Norman F. McFarland to establish a parish in the new community of Rancho Santa Margarita.

The Catholic Parish Community of San Francisco Solano celebrated its first liturgy on July 3, 1989. Under Father Pecharich's leadership, the congregation has grown to more than 4,000 families or about 16,000 individuals. Bishop McFarland dedicated the church building on May 25, 1996. Concurrently, the parish participated in establishing Serra Catholic School, which serves children from kindergarten to 8th grade. Since the dedication of the new church, the parish has undertaken two additional building projects including an addition to the parish administrative center and a religious education center.

Father Pecharich will announce his immediate departure to the parish congregation at Mass this weekend. Diocesan representatives will be available after all Masses to meet

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with the congregation and answer questions. Father Craig Butters, Chaplin for Santa Margarita Catholic High School, has been appointed parish administrator pro tem until a new pastor is named. Father Joseph Droessler, Parochial Vicar and Sister Barbara Reder, S.P., Pastoral Associate will continue in their respective roles in the parish. Future meetings between the Diocese and the parish community will be scheduled to assist the congregation in its transition.

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