News



John Besh is pictured April 20, 2012, at the Louisiana Seafood Cook-Off. (U.S. Marine Corps/Marcin Platek)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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Prominent New Orleans chef John Besh, who has been active in several Catholic organizations around the country, has stepped down from at least one in the aftermath of multiple allegations of sexual harassment at his restaurants and company.

Besh resigned from the executive advisory board for the Center for Ethics and Culture at the University of Notre Dame last week, according to O. Carter Snead, the center's director. Besh had presented at the center's conference and prepared a special dinner in the university's two dining halls in 2016.

Other Catholic entities that have been affiliated with Besh have not released statements about their future relationship with the James Beard Award-winning chef.

His resignation from the Notre Dame scholarly center followed a newspaper report of a culture of sexual harassment at Besh Restaurant Group and at a number of its restaurants, with allegations by 25 victims, including two who filed complaints with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. One complainant said Besh "continued to attempt to coerce [her] to submit to his sexual overtures" during a months-long sexual relationship when she worked for him, according to The Times-Picayune.

After publication of the report, Besh stepped down from "all aspects of operations" from the restaurant company he founded, according to the New Orleans Advocate. In addition, Harrah's New Orleans cut ties with Besh, changing its restaurant's name from "Besh Steak" to "BH Steak,"and public television station WYES announced it will no longer air cooking shows it produced with Besh.

Station President and CEO Allan Pizzato said in a statement: "WYES would not want any viewers to think that broadcast of those programs represented condonation of actions of the type alleged."

In its eight-month investigation, The Times-Picayune heard allegations from dozens of women who said they experienced touching without consent, suggestive comments about their appearance and lack of response about their complaints at Besh's company and restaurants. In a few cases, victims said people in authority tried to leverage their positions for sex, the newspaper reported.

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In a statement, Besh said he accepted responsibility for his "moral failings" of engaging in what he termed a "consensual relationship' with a member of his team. "Since then I have been seeking to rebuild my marriage and come to terms with my reckless actions given the profound love I have for my wife, my boys and my Catholic faith," he said.

NCR attempted to contact Besh. A spokesperson for his company said Besh is spending time with his family and is not available for comment.

Besh has credited his Catholic faith as important in his life and in his charitable work, which includes as a host of the Archdiocese of New Orleans' annual Olive Mass for those who work in the hospitality industry (similar to the Red Mass for the legal profession, Blue Mass for law enforcement and White Mass for the medical field).

The second annual Olive Mass was held Sept. 25 at New Orleans' St. Louis Cathedral, with Archbishop Gregory Aymond as principal celebrant, followed by a reception at one of Besh's restaurants.

Second annual Olive Mass Sept. 25 at New Orleans' St. Louis Cathedral (Archdiocese of New Orleans YouTube channel)

The Archdiocese of New Orleans had no statement in the aftermath of the report about Besh, with spokeswoman Sarah Comiskey McDonald noting only that "the Olive Mass is sponsored by the Table Foundation."

The Table Foundation is the not-for-profit arm of an organization headed by Fr. Leo Patalinghug, who also is founder and director of the for-profit Grace Before Meals, which offers public speaking, pilgrimages and travel, and "Savoring Our Faith," a television show on EWTN. Both organizations seek to find deeper meaning in food and community; Grace Before Meals' mission is to "strengthen relationships through the family meal,' according to its website.

Patalinghug, a priest of the secular institute Voluntas Dei, declined to be interviewed by NCR.

In addition to sponsoring the Olive Mass, the Table Foundation aims to use "the power of food to educate, inspire and feed communities," according to its website. A

major project is the Table Foundation House, which will include a storefront café, space for charitable events and an apprentice program for ex-offenders focused on virtues such as humility, compassion and celebration.

Jenifer Berrigan Besh, John Besh's wife, is a member of the Table Foundation's board. She also will continue to serve on the board of Notre Dame's Center for Ethics and Culture and has been a member "for quite some time," Snead said in an email.

The Beshes are parishioners of St. Luke the Evangelist Church in Slidell, Louisiana, John Besh's hometown, according to a March 2017 profile of the chef in the Clarion Herald, the archdiocesan newspaper.

Besh emerged as a leader in rebuilding the city's restaurant scene after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and his company's foundation funds culinary school scholarships for aspiring minority chefs. The John Besh Foundation has also been involved in disaster relief after this season's hurricanes.

He also has been involved with Chefs4Peace, which brings together Jewish, Christian and Muslim chefs in the Holy Land to model religious tolerance. Besh traveled to Israel as the featured guest for a 2016 "A Journey of Food and Faith" tour organized by the archdiocesan newspaper.

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