News



Jesuit Fr. Patrick J. Conroy, in a photo taken May 8, 2017, had been the chaplain of the U.S. House of Representatives since 2011. (CNS photo/Rhina Guidos)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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In a story with multiple updates late Thursday afternoon, Jesuit Fr. Pat Conroy rescinded his resignation as chaplain to the U.S. House of Representatives, House Speaker Paul Ryan changed his mind and decided to keep him in the position, and House Democratic Caucus Chairman Joe Crowley of New York called for an inquiry into the initial dismissal.

In response, Catholic leaders are praising what seems to be a resolution after a week of controversy and conflicting reports of why the priest was asked to resign in the first place.

"I am pleased that Father Conroy will remain as House Chaplain," Rep. Linda Sánchez (D-Calif.) told NCR in an emailed statement, adding that Conroy's service "has been a blessing" to House members.

"We must work to keep the Chaplain's office out of the political fray," she added.

Sánchez is one of more than 140 Catholics in the House, many of whom signed a letter asking for more information after it became public that Conroy's resignation was not voluntary.

So did Rep. Rosa DeLauro of Connecticut,* another Catholic and Democrat, who also praised Ryan's dramatic reversal late Thursday. Ryan had continued to defend the priest's dismissal throughout the past week.

"Speaker Ryan did the right thing by refraining from further politicization of the Office of House Chaplain and reversing his decision to terminate Father Conroy," DeLauro tweeted.

Conroy "has carried out his duties with dignity and commitment, and has never wavered in his strong pastoral presence on behalf of the entire House of Representatives," she said in the tweet.

Thursday's story began with the release of Conroy's letter to Ryan, in which the priest rescinded his resignation, saying he believed the speaker had no cause to oust him.

"I have never been disciplined, nor reprimanded, nor have I ever heard a complaint about my ministry during my time as House chaplain," Conroy wrote.

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Conroy said in the letter that he felt he had no choice to resign after Ryan's chief of staff, Jonathan Burks told him, "maybe it's time that we had a chaplain that wasn't a Catholic" — remarks Burks denied.

After Conroy's resignation became public, Ryan said the priest was not providing appropriate pastoral services to House members — a charge Conroy said Ryan never conveyed to him. "In fact, no such criticism has ever been leveled against me during my tenure as House Chaplain," Conroy wrote to Ryan.

Some House members tied his forced resignation to a Nov. 6 prayer by Conroy that was perceived as being critical of the GOP tax cut bill, in which he implored the representatives to "guarantee that there are not winners and losers under new tax laws, but benefits balanced and shared by all Americans."

Within hours of Conroy's letter to Ryan, the speaker released a statement saying he had decided the priest should remain in his position as chaplain. Ryan is also Catholic.

"My original decision was made in what I believed to be the best interest of this institution," Ryan said in the statement, standing by his earlier concerns about "the kind of pastoral services" needed from the chaplain.

But he added that, "It is my job as speaker to do what is best for this body, and I know that this body is not well served by a protracted fight over such an important post."

Crowley, who is also Catholic, praised Ryan's reversal, but called for an inquiry into the events leading to Conroy's dismissal.

"Father Pat has served the House honorably for more than seven years, and I'm glad that he will remain the House Chaplain. Still, because there are conflicting reports and questions left unanswered, we need a full understanding of what happened," he said in a statement.

"I hope Republicans will join Democrats to help us get the facts and ensure that something like this doesn't happen again," Crowley said.

John Gehring, the Catholic program director at Faith in Public Life, a national network of clergy and religious leaders committed to justice issues, agreed with the need for answers.

"The idea that a priest could have been pushed aside for praying about justice and the common good is disturbing," Gehring said in a statement provided to NCR. "We need honest answers from Ryan and Republican leaders about why a pastor doing his job felt pressured to step down in the first place."

*This story has been updated to correct Rep. DeLauro's state.

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