News



Franciscan Fr. Sean Sheridan in 2017 (CNS/Bob Roller)



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After months of pressure from the right-wing media organization Church Militant and its supporters, many of them parents of current students at Franciscan University of Steubenville as well as alumni of the Ohio school, Franciscan Fr. Sean Sheridan tendered to the Board of Trustees his resignation as president.

His resignation comes in the wake of a challenging academic year for Sheridan and the university. At a Mass opening the academic year, Sheridan delivered a homily that addressed the sexual abuse crisis in the church at large as well as at Franciscan University, where several incidents of abuse were mishandled and where it was revealed later in the year that credible allegations had been made against a well-known friar at the school.

The final straw, however, may have been controversy over assignment of a novel to a high-level literature seminar that conservatives found objectionable and that Church Militant picked up as a cause against Sheridan.

Reactions to the news of the April 5 resignation of Sheridan and subsequent search for a new president have been mixed. Some expressed relief, while others have worried about finding a better replacement.

Even in the midst of this turmoil, the alumni magazine, Franciscan, is already soliciting requests for fond memories and stories of Sheridan, as the next issue of the quarterly publication will be dedicated to him.

Commenters on the school's official Facebook page thanked Sheridan for his service and expressed dismay for his decision. In his own statement, Sheridan said that he made the decision "after a great deal of prayer," and that he feels "called to continue my service to the Catholic Church in another capacity."

In an April 8 press release, Franciscan Fr. Malachi Van Tassell, chairman of the Board of Trustees, thanked Sheridan for his years of service as president. Van Tassell has been chairman of the board for a just short while. His predecessor, Fr. Richard Davis, resigned abruptly in January from his position as minister provincial of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis' Province of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus (the congregation that operates the university) and as chairman of the university's Board of Trustees.

In the homily opening the academic year, Sheridan said, "I also apologize for any way that we have failed to protect you or have not taken seriously any concerns you have voiced, and I again ask your forgiveness." He was apparently alluding to stories of mishandling of sexual misconduct incidents, as first reported by National Catholic Reporter in April 2018, and again in October 2018, with several of those incidents occurring during Sheridan's tenure.

Just two weeks after this homily and the announcement of the Integrity and Truth Initiative, Sheridan revealed that credible allegations against a now-deceased friar, Franciscan Fr. Sam Tiesi, had been received, prompting the swift removal of a plaque honoring his memory. While victims of Tiesi were grateful, many alumni and friends of the university expressed disappointment, grappling with the allegations against the beloved friar.

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This past Friday afternoon, April 12, Franciscan University released a portion of the Husch Blackwell report on the university's website, which detailed some of the cases of sexual abuse at the hands of friars, while other accounts were withheld in order to be "consistent with the privacy interests of victims and students." This report contradicts Sheridan's initial statement regarding Tiesi, which claimed that Tiesi offended only in the early 1990s. According to this new report, Tiesi first violated students in 1978, the year he arrived on campus.

One glaring omission from the report's publicly released findings is any mention of Joseph Moore, a priest who served as a dorm director at Franciscan University from the fall of 1986 to the spring of 1988. Moore was removed from ministry in 1997 and subsequently laicized in 2004, due to multiple credible allegations of sexual molestation, according to the Diocese of Bridgeport, Connecticut. After NCR reached out to Franciscan University for comment on this omission, Tom Sofio, associate director of marketing and communications, responded with a link to a supplement to the review that states, "On April 15, 2019 a journalist brought to the attention of Franciscan University of Steubenville matters pertaining to Reverend Joseph Moore, a now-laicized priest of the Diocese of Connecticut." According to this supplement, Moore has been added to the document. *

But perhaps the most significant incident in Sheridan's presidency has been the matter of a novel assigned by Stephen Lewis, a professor of English. Although The Kingdom, written by Emmanuel Carrère, was assigned several semesters ago and only to a handful of students in an upper-level seminar, Church Militant condemned the assignment as blasphemous, claiming as well that several faculty members disapproved of the assignment.

Initially, Sheridan defended Lewis, but eventually changed his statement after many parents of students and alumni complained, and Scott Hahn, well-known Catholic apologist and professor at Franciscan University, publicly expressed his disappointment in Sheridan's statement.

Church Militant commenters praised the publication for "making a mess of the church of nice," indicating a belief that Church Militant is to be thanked for the resignation. According to this article that announces Sheridan's resignation, Church Militant remains unsatisfied with Lewis' demotion from chairman of the English Department, insisting instead that he should have been dismissed outright.

Requests for comment from Michael Voris and Church Militant were rejected. A message from the Church Militant news team was conveyed via the receptionist, saying, "We have no comment at this time."

Jay McNally, a freelance writer and regular contributor to Church Militant's website, thinks that Sheridan's resignation was a direct result of Church Militant's revelations.

"Steubenville [Franciscan University] is so highly recognized as such an orthodox place, and the donors are likely to be pretty darn serious about their faith. The donors, the millionaires who have donated a lot of money over the years, I'm sure they made more than a few phone calls," he told NCR. "So much has gone into Steubenville over the past decades, and it only takes one person to undo that."

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Church Militant believes that Lewis' support of Rebecca Bratten Weiss, an English professor whose contract was not renewed in 2017, is proof that Lewis is a liability and "one of the main reasons the university has suffered damage to its credibility and reputation."

Weiss, however, is less than sympathetic. She claimed that Sheridan refused to renew her contract "due to slander and even obvious lies about me. That my extremely high ratings made less impact on him than the possibility that I'd gone to the Women's March speaks volumes about his academic and ethical capacities. How ironic that the same extremists he pandered to should have turned on him as well."

Anne Marie (Sohler) Snoddy, class of 2009, is not pleased with Sheridan's resignation.

"I'm concerned by Father Sean's sudden resignation and am worried that it may have been instigated by smears against him by Church Militant," she said. "I'm sorry Father Sean is leaving, and I hope his successor will see these calumnious sources for what they are."

Justin Luther, class of 2013, is dismayed that the mishandling of sexual assault cases was not the reason for the criticism lobbed against Sheridan, and fears it has more to do with the Lewis situation.

"Standing by an arguably overqualified department head for actually doing his job should not be viewed as a worse decision than standing by the student life department's choices over the past 10 years, but sadly it seems that is the case in the view of a large portion of students and alumni," he said.

Speaking on the condition of anonymity, one member of Franciscan University's faculty said that Sheridan's resignation was not strictly voluntary.

"I was approached about my willingness to participate in a vote of 'no confidence' in the president and in the entire administration," the professor said. "I expressed my skepticism that such a vote would be held, but they insisted someone really important was pushing for this vote, and that it would definitely take place."

Later, however, the same faculty member that approached the anonymous professor shared that the board would be acting and so such a vote would not be necessary.

When asked whether the sexual assault cases and the Lewis incident factored into Sheridan's decision and whether Sheridan felt pressure to resign, Sofio merely provided a copy of the press release posted on the university's website.

An April 9 Facebook post by Franciscan Fr. Brian Cavanaugh, who works in the university's technology office, states, "During these difficult days ahead of us all as members of the Franciscan University community, I pass along these words of hope from the Book of Hebrews." He shared an image of the campus chapel with a quote of Hebrews 3:13-14.

Cavanaugh tells NCR that there is no hidden meaning in his post, but that Sheridan's resignation has left students and other members of the Franciscan University family confused.

"The resignation leaves a void — suddenly and without warning — so I wanted to offer words of hope to the rest of our community. We can encourage one another as long as it's called today," he said.

Hahn, whom many Church Militant supporters have called to become the next president of Franciscan University, shared Cavanaugh's Facebook post on his own account. The post, and Hahn's seeming support of its contents, alludes to another statement of the anonymous faculty member — that more trouble is brewing for Franciscan University.

"The board appears to be well-aware that there are serious problems with the TORs [Third Order Regular of St. Francis]. What will come of it all is anyone's guess."

[Jenn Morson, a Franciscan University of Steubenville graduate, is a freelance writer based in the Washington, D.C., area.]

* *This story has been updated.*