News



The USS Kidd passes downtown San Diego as it returns to Naval Base San Diego, Tuesday, April 28, 2020, seen from Coronado, Calif. As the American destroyer heads home with an outbreak in cases of COVID-19, relatives and friends of the 350 crew members prayed for their health while Navy officials vowed to keep the outbreak, the second to strike a Navy vessel at sea, from spreading. (AP/Gregory Bull)

Alejandra Molina

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The U.S. Navy will retain contracts with civilian Catholic priests at naval bases in California for at least another year, the Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA, said.

This announcement came days after The San Diego Union-Tribune on Sept. 5 reported that Catholic Masses at San Diego Navy bases had ended because the Navy, as part of a cost cutting move, declined to renew contracts with Catholic priests.

The newspaper reported the Navy's religious ministries changes were part of a national realignment announced on Aug. 20. Meanwhile, on-base Protestant services, led by active-duty non-Catholic chaplains, were to continue as usual, the archdiocese said.

U.S. Navy chaplains serve the pastoral needs of the Navy, the Marines and the Coast Guard, the archdiocese said in a news release. Amid a nationwide shortage of Catholic priests, only 48 priests serve as active-duty Navy chaplains, according to the archdiocese.

"Hardly enough to meet the pastoral needs of more than [135,000] Catholics now on active duty in all three service branches, plus their families," the archdiocese said.

The archdiocese said the Catholic Church depends on civilian priests under contract with the Department of Defense to fill the gap.

In a statement sent Tuesday to Religion News Service, the U.S. Navy said it will continue "contracted religious ministry programs" this year "contrary to previous discussions."

"We will also continue to assess how best to meet the needs of our sailors and their families throughout the region," the statement read.

The archbishop for the Military Services, USA, the Most Rev. Timothy P. Broglio, applauded the decision to retain the priests.

"Catholics in the Navy and everywhere in this Country rejoice in the decision by the U.S. Navy to reconsider closing the thriving Catholic programs at naval stations in California," Broglio said in a statement sent to RNS.

"I am deeply grateful to everyone who lent their support and encouragement to maintaining these programs," Broglio added.

On Twitter, President Donald Trump and South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham pushed back on the reported cancellation of the contract.

First Liberty Institute, a legal organization that focuses on religious freedom issues, sent a letter Tuesday to Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper, urging him to "take immediate and affirmative steps to remedy this situation."

"The government cannot provide for Protestant and other chaplains while excluding Catholics. This kind of preferential treatment and discrimination is abhorrent to the Constitution," the letter read.

Broglio in a news release Tuesday had noted the savings from canceling these contracts amounted to $250,000.

"It is difficult to fathom how the First Amendment rights of the largest faith group in the Navy can be compromised for such an insignificant sum," Broglio said.

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