News

An older white man wears a clerical collar and black suit jacket in an office space

Holy Cross Fr. John I. Jenkins, president of the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, is pictured in an undated photo. The university announced Oct. 13, 2023, that Jenkins will step down at the end of this academic year. (OSV News photo/courtesy University of Notre Dame)

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The longtime president of the University of Notre Dame in Indiana will step down at the end of the current academic year to return to teaching and ministry at the school.

Fr. John I. Jenkins, a Holy Cross priest, announced the news Oct. 13, according to a media release posted by the university.

Elected in 2005 as the university's 17th president, Jenkins was most recently reelected by Notre Dame's trustees to his fourth five-year term effective July 1, 2020.

In the same release, the university also noted that John B. Veihmeyer, the retired chairman of KPMG International, has been elected as chair of Notre Dame's board of trustees, effective June 2024 and succeeding current chair John J. Brennan.

Jenkins said his tenure as president had been "both a privilege and a calling."

Brennan said that the university "is and has been incredibly blessed by Father Jenkins' courageous and visionary leadership," which had been directed toward building "a great Catholic university for the 21st century."

A search is now underway for the university's next president, who will be elected by the trustees from among the priests of the Congregation of the Holy Cross, which founded the school in 1842. The school's governance was transferred in 1967 from the congregation to a two-tiered board of lay and religious trustees and fellows.

Under Jenkins' leadership, Notre Dame saw significant growth and expansion, particularly in its research initiatives, global engagement, student diversity and financial resources. The school was admitted this year to the Association of American Universities, which represents the nation's leading research universities.

In addition, Notre Dame enjoys partnerships with a number of schools throughout the nation and the world. The university operates Global Gateways in Rome, Dublin, Jerusalem, Beijing and London, as well as six Global Centers in Hong Kong, Ireland, Mexico City, Mumbai, São Paulo and Santiago.

Notre Dame also has worked closely for more than two decades with Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, Ukraine, and entered into an agreement with UCU in 2022 to significantly expand that relationship.

At the same time, Jenkins faced criticism at points during his tenure. Following a lawsuit filed by the university, he applauded a 2017 Trump administration expansion of the religious freedom exemption from a 2012 U.S. Health and Human Services mandate requiring most employers to include contraceptives, abortifacients and sterilizations in their employee health plans. However, Jenkins opted to allow third-party administrators to provide such coverage, saying the "university's interest has never been in preventing access to those who make conscientious decisions to use contraceptives," but was rather "to avoid being compelled by the federal government to be the agent in their provision."

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A 2016 decision by Jenkins to award then-Vice President Joe Biden the Laetare Medal -- the oldest and most prestigious award for American Catholics -- was rebuked by Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana, who said in a lengthy statement that it was "wrong for Notre Dame to honor any 'pro-choice' public official with the Laetare Medal."

Similarly, a 2009 commencement address by President Barack Obama (part of the university's custom of having U.S. presidents speak at the school graduation while in office) sparked backlash.

Jenkins has throughout his career promoted civil discourse, and has served as a longtime member of the Commission on Presidential Debates.

In addition, he has been a leading national voice on college athletics. In a March 23 New York Times opinion piece he co-wrote with Jack Swarbrick, Notre Dame's athletics director, Jenkins called on universities "to reaffirm that student-athletes are students first and to ensure that their athletic programs serve the schools' broader educational mission, not the other way around."

Jenkins is a member of the university's philosophy department, teaching on ancient and medieval philosophy, the relationship between faith and reason, and the works of St. Thomas Aquinas. He holds undergraduate and graduate degrees from Notre Dame, along with a doctorate of philosophy from Oxford University and a master of divinity and licentiate in sacred theology from the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley in California.

His writings include the book "Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas," as well as scholarly articles for The Journal of Philosophy, Medieval Philosophy and Theology, and the Journal of Religious Ethics.

Jenkins also has written on Catholic higher education, noting in a 2015 journal article that while "Catholic colleges and universities face significant challenges in the present context of American higher education," such institutions, which are "situated in the Catholic intellectual life … can enjoy substantive orientation in their academic endeavors while fostering serious inquiry and vigorous debate."

Rhoades, who is presently in Rome attending the Synod on Synodality, gave a statement to OSV News extending his "prayerful best wishes" to Jenkins "after 19 years of dedicated leadership and service."

"I am grateful that, in promoting the growth of research at the university, Father Jenkins has promoted the moral, spiritual, and religious dimensions of that research, an important part of Notre Dame's distinctive Catholic identity," he said. "I am also grateful for Father Jenkins' commitment to the pastoral ministry at Notre Dame and the spiritual welfare of the students, his dedication to Notre Dame's service of our local church as well as the wider church throughout the world, and for his advocacy of civility in public discourse, so much needed in our nation and world today."

Rhoades said he was "personally happy that Father Jenkins will continue his priestly ministry here in our diocese, teaching and serving at Notre Dame" and assured him of his prayers during the transition. He also extended his prayers to Notre Dame's board of trustees and the Congregation of the Holy Cross, adding, "I am most grateful for their commitment to maintain and strengthen the Catholic character of the University of Notre Dame."