News



A sign on the campus of the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. (NCR photo/Teresa Malcolm)



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Real estate executive and philanthropist Robert Neal has been elected chairman of the Catholic University of America's Board of Trustees while Bishop John Barres of Rockville Centre, New York, was elected the board's vice chairman, the Washington, D.C., university announced June 10.

The university also announced the election of five new members to its Board of Trustees, among them Bishop David Toups of Beaumont, Texas. Toups was a rector and president of a seminary for the Southeastern United States before his episcopal ordination in 2020.

Neal succeeds Victor Smith, a business executive who had served as the board chairman since 2021. In a prepared statement, Catholic University President Peter Kilpatrick said the university was "grateful" to Neal for "his willingness and enthusiasm to take on this crucial leadership role."

"Rob's experience, insights, and instincts will further strengthen our commitment to being a premier higher education institution that leads and serves in the Catholic Church and the nation," Kilpatrick said.

A resident of Newport Beach, California, Neal is a managing partner with Hager Pacific Properties, a commercial real estate firm that says its portfolio of 100 properties throughout the United States is worth more than $2 billion.

Neal has held board positions with several Catholic initiatives, including Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Leadership Institute, Christ Catholic Cathedral Corporation, and the Papal Foundation, as well as the Magis Institute of Reason and Faith, a nonprofit founded by Jesuit Fr. Robert Spitzer and Tim Busch, the conservative Catholic businessman and Napa Institute board chairman who has donated millions of dollars to Catholic University in recent years.

Neal has also been a member of Legatus, an exclusive group for Catholic business leaders and executives, and currently serves on the board of directors for the Becket Fund, a Washington, D.C., law firm that specializes in First Amendment religion cases. During the presidency of Barack Obama, the Becket Fund represented dozens

of plaintiffs who sued the federal government over the Affordable Care Act's requirement that employers provide coverage for birth control in their health insurance plans.

In prepared remarks, Neal said he is "very excited" for the future of Catholic University of America. He added that the university will "continue to build a world class faculty and attract students from across the globe who are drawn to the opportunities of study and faith in Washington DC."

An alumnus of Catholic University, Barres "has been actively engaged in lifting the visibility of the University on Long Island" through outreach events and supporting the university's partnership with the local Catholic television station, the university said in its press release.

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Named the bishop of Rockville Centre in 2017, Barres is a member of Opus Dei whose social media account on X has often quoted Pope Francis' speeches and apostolic exhortations. However, controversies during Barres' tenure have led to negative headlines in local and national media outlets.

In August 2018, a Pennsylvania grand jury report on the historical scope of clergy sex abuse in that state criticized Barres for his handling of an abuse case while he served as bishop of Allentown from 2009 to 2017. Barres' lawyer challenged the report's assertions.

In December 2023, a Catholic school teacher in the Rockville Centre Diocese said he was fired from his job for being in a same-sex relationship. A diocesan spokesman told OSV News in January that the teacher's firing was not related to his sexuality.

More recently, a federal judge on May 17 denied the Rockville Centre Diocese's motion to dismiss its pending bankruptcy case, which has been marred by a three-and-a-half-year impasse in negotiations between the diocese and clergy sex abuse survivors. The judge appointed two mediators to try to reach an agreement.

In addition to Neal and Barres, the Catholic University of America also announced the following additions to its board of trustees: investor and philanthropist Tim Connors; technology executive John Corcoran; executive Ed Gillespie; and Javier Mazariegos, who graduated from the university in 2023.

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