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Cafardi resigns as Franciscan University trustee

by Chaz Muth by Catholic News Service



WASHINGTON -- Following his public endorsement of Democratic

presidential nominee Sen. Barack Obama, a Catholic legal scholar has resigned from the board of trustees at Ohio's Franciscan University of Steubenville.

Nicholas P. Cafardi submitted his letter of resignation Oct. 6, which was accepted by the school's president, Franciscan Father Terrance Henry, on behalf of the board, according to a statement issued by the Catholic university Oct. 7.

The resignation came a week after Cafardi, dean emeritus and a professor of law at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, wrote a column for Religion News Service endorsing Obama, in spite of Obama's support for legal abortion. He wrote, "We have lost the abortion battle -- permanently." The **column was published online** by *National Catholic Reporter*.

Cafardi, an expert in civil and canon law, told Religion News Service that he quit the school's board voluntarily.

"When it became apparent to me that some Catholics who disagree with my position on how to end the horror of abortion in America were using my association with Steubenville to try to harm that great university," Cafardi said, "I thought that the best thing for me was to resign so as to prevent that harm."

A statement issued by Franciscan University said Cafardi's exit was voluntary. He had served on the board of trustees since 2002.

"Our president spoke with Dr. Cafardi and let him know that this was causing concern among our constituents about Franciscan University's pro-life stance," university spokesman Tom Sofio told Catholic News Service Oct. 8. "The letter of resignation arrived a few days after that conversation."

The resignation came four days after the university issued a statement that distanced the school from the legal scholar's published opinions, affirmed its own tradition of not endorsing political candidates, and vehemently disagreed that the abortion battle was lost in the U.S.

"Dr. Nicholas Cafardi's defense of Barack Obama as a moral choice for Catholics reflects his views as a private citizen, and in no way reflects the views of Franciscan University of Steubenville," the Oct. 2 statement said.

"As a Catholic university, Franciscan fosters an environment through education and activities that proclaims the sanctity of life, most notably through its Human Life Studies program and Institute of Bioethics," it said.

"Franciscan University students take pro-life issues to heart, fighting for the end of abortion through sidewalk counseling at abortion clinics, participation in the March for Life in Washington, D.C., countless hours of prayer, and many other activities," the statement added.

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Cafardi was the second high-profile Catholic legal scholar to publicly support Obama, despite the fact that both men are pro-life advocates. The first, in September, was Douglas W. Kmiec, professor of constitutional law and holder of the Caruso Family chair in constitutional law at Pepperdine University in Malibu, Calif.

"Is that a proper moral choice for a committed Catholic?" Cafardi asked in his Sept. 30 column about his support for Obama. "As one of the inaugural members of the U.S. bishops' National Review Board on clergy sexual abuse, and as a canon lawyer, I answer with a resounding yes.

"Despite what some Republicans would like Catholics to believe, the list of what the church calls 'intrinsically evil acts' does not begin and end with abortion," he said. "In fact, there are many intrinsically evil acts, and a committed Catholic must consider all of them in deciding how to vote."

Since Obama publicly opposed a war with Iraq in 2003, does not support the use of torture as a military tool, wants to combat poverty and has vowed to help reduce the number of abortions, Cafardi said, the Democratic candidate is strong on other life issues important to the church.

"The U.S. bishops have urged a 'different kind of political engagement,' one that is 'shaped by the moral convictions of well-formed consciences,'" he said. "I have informed my conscience. I have weighed the facts. I have used my prudential judgment. And I conclude that it is a proper moral choice for this Catholic to support Barack Obama's candidacy."

Efforts by CNS to reach Cafardi for comment Oct. 8 were unsuccessful.

The commentary and resignation don't appear to have created a disruption on campus, but the school did receive a "flurry" of phone calls and e-mails Oct. 7 after news reports circulated about the situation, Sofio said.

"Since then the overwhelming majority of comments have been supportive and positive," he added.

In July 2002 Cafardi was named to a three-year term as a member of the bishops' National Review Board; he was chairman of the board from October 2004 until the end of his term. The review board was established by the bishops in June 2002 to assist and monitor their efforts to protect children and end clergy sexual abuse of minors nationwide.

(Religion News Service contributed to this report.)

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