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Surprise resignation stuns California seminary students, faculty

Dan Morris-Young | Oct. 8, 2013

Sulpician Fr. James McKearney has been forced to resign as rector and president of St. Patrick Seminary and University in Menlo Park, Calif., a surprise event some call an appropriate change in leadership and others decry as "brutal" and "confusing."

McKearney's sudden removal by San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone stunned students and faculty and the Sulpician himself.

"It just came out of the blue for reasons that are still not clear to myself or my provincial," McKearney told *NCR*.

McKearney said during the school's annual gala Sept. 14, Cordileone insisted on a 2 p.m. meeting with him two days later -- a Monday -- at the seminary. During the gala, Cordileone publicly thanked McKearney for his leadership and labors.

Cordileone, San Jose Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Daly and San Francisco Vicar for Administration James Tarantino met with McKearney on Sept. 16 and left him no option but to resign, according to McKearney, who had been president-rector since 2009 and at the seminary since 1999. The seminary currently serves 93 students from more than a dozen dioceses, most based in California.

That same afternoon, both the archdiocese and the San Jose diocese issued releases announcing that Daly had been named interim president and rector.

At the same time it was announced that:

- Jesuit Fr. John Piderit, former Loyola University-Chicago president, would become St. Patrick's new vice president for administration in addition to continuing as vicar for finance;
- Basilian Fr. Anthony Giampietro would be executive vice president for advancement and academic dean;
- Sulpician Fr. Gladstone Stevens would continue as vice rector and dean of men.

McKearney and others questioned why, in the event a rector-president is no longer able to function, the vice rector would not have taken the seminary leadership post on an interim basis as is normally the protocol.

"De facto," McKearney said, "the seminary is no longer under Sulpician administration for the first time in its 114-year history."

U.S. Sulpician Provincial Fr. Thomas Ulshafer "was not consulted, but was informed" of McKearney's pending removal the morning of Sept. 16, according to knowledgeable sources.

"It is certainly an usual situation considering the sudden departure," Ulshafer said Sept. 30 from the provincial offices in Baltimore.

Ulshafer said he flew to the West Coast and met with Cordileone on Sept. 27 at the archbishop's request.

"I also wanted to come out for my own reasons. This is a very unusual situation and my Sulpician priests wanted to discuss things with me," the provincial added.

Eight Sulpicians remain at the seminary: the vice rector, a graduate student, and six faculty members.

"They are fine, given the sudden, unexpected departure" of McKearney, Ulshafer told *NCR*.

Asked if the Society of St. Sulpice viewed Cordileone's bypassing consultation and ignoring the historic seminary chain-of-command protocol as troubling, Ulshafer said Cordileone had apparently judged the situation "unusual and pressing" in making his decision. Ulshafer also said the archbishop made it clear he wants the Sulpicians to remain at St. Patrick's.

The San Francisco archdiocese owns the seminary and its extensive grounds, but the Sulpicians helped found it in 1898 and have administered it since.

"The bishop with authority over a seminary has the right and duty to appoint or, in our case to approve the appointment of, the rector," Ulshafer wrote in an Oct. 3 email. "The bishops and the Holy See have the final responsibility for the formation of priests. The Sulpicians assist them with this task and do not operate independently."

He continued: "The archbishop has said that his action was not a step toward removing the Sulpicians from St. Patrick's and that he would like the Sulpicians to continue to conduct the seminary program. These words do not seem to be those of a bishop who wants to 'take a slap at the Sulpicians.' "

Vice rector Stevens, a Sulpician, declined comment, noting that faculty had been told to funnel media requests to Melanie Morey, seminary provost.

"The Sulpician charism is still very strong here," Morey said. "There is a process in place which will surface another Sulpician" to lead the seminary.

"This will take some time, and the Sulpicians will want to do their own internal work" to come up with "a slate of possible people" for the president-rector post, she said.

No explanation for sudden dismissal

Meanwhile, the reasons for McKearney's rapid, closed-door removal remained open to conjecture, and its suddenness generated curiosity and rumors.

Morey said Cordileone himself met with faculty and staff the day of the resignation to share that he "had given it careful consideration" and "would not have made the move if he did not think it was warranted," and "he was abundantly clear that nothing immoral or illegal was involved" on McKearney's part.

"It is absolutely not true" that McKearney's exit was related to "anything inappropriate," Morey said.

"The archbishop was very clear that Fr. McKearney had brought many gifts to the institution ... and chief among them were the people he had brought in as faculty and administrators."

Asked about the reasons for the dismissal and why the urgency, Morey said, "I would be very uncomfortable second-guessing the archbishop on that. That would be better for him to describe. I think certainly the timing

was difficult, and I am sure the archbishop would say the same thing. It was anything but ideal."

San Francisco archdiocesan director of media relations Christine Mugridge on Sept. 30 wrote in an email that she would "get back with you later in the week on your questions." On Oct. 3, she replied that there would be no comment from the archdiocese "at this time."

"The change in leadership in no way should be construed as a negative regarding the past rector," Mugridge added.

As of Tuesday, there were no responses to inquiries sent Friday to Daly's office. The bishop was said to be out of town.

From Baltimore on Friday, McKearney said he remained "at a bit of a loss."

"I am not at all satisfied with the reasons I was given," he said, noting that the archbishop "in general said he had lost confidence in me to lead and administer the seminary. He thanked me for my fidelity and service to the archdiocese, but felt the seminary was in crisis" around enrollment issues "and that it would be best to replace me immediately."

St. Patrick's enrollment reached a recent-history high mark of 114 for the 2012-13 school year. However, enrollment dropped to 93 for this year, and only a dozen new students enrolled.

After three years as bishop of Oakland, Cordileone succeeded George Niederauer as San Francisco archbishop in October of last year.

The Seattle archdiocese stopped sending students to St. Patrick this fall in what a Seattle spokesperson called "consolidating" their placements at "Mt. Angel in Oregon, Bishop White in Spokane, Mundelein in Chicago and North American College in Rome."

According to McKearney, the Monterey diocese will keep its current St. Patrick students in Menlo Park, but this fall began sending new seminarians to St. John Seminary in Camarillo, the seminary of the Los Angeles archdiocese.

It is unknown if other dioceses are considering similar changes, but one source familiar with the situation underscored that St. Patrick's "is such a natural seminary for so many dioceses."

Since his departure, McKearney said he has "heard from almost all the Sulpicians" at the seminary, "a huge number of the seminarians, a large number of the staff, from many of the faculty members, from both communities of sisters" that work at the campus, and from "a number of bishops who sponsor seminarians." He said he has been "edified" by the "wonderful and overwhelming concern and support."

He said he received an affirming missive from San Jose Bishop Patrick McGrath, thanking him for both his seminary contributions and his work within the San Jose diocese.

However, the former rector said he had not heard from current administration members with the exception of Stevens, the Sulpician vice rector.

Multiple interviews indicate it was unlikely that the school's board of trustees was consulted about concerns with McKearney's administration or plans for his imminent removal. After his resignation, McKearney said he had been sent messages of thanks and appreciation from two trustees, Bishop John Wester of Salt Lake and San Francisco Auxiliary Bishop William Justice.

Contacted at his office, Justice declined comment.

Cordileone chairs the board of trustees. Its next meeting is scheduled for Oct. 16.

'Change can be hard'

Morey said the student body "seems to be calm and moving forward."

"Change can be hard institutionally," Morey said. "People kind of need to step back and absorb the shock, but then move forward."

She lauded Daly's appointment: "Bishop Daly brings tremendous gifts to this institution right now. He is an alumnus. He has great affection for the Sulpicians and his education here. He knows tons of people in this neck of the woods, and he has great enthusiasm for the mission and possibilities for the work we do here. He really will be an excellent president-rector. He is very consultative and available, and he has been a vocations director. He brings many, many gifts and we are lucky at this point of transition to have him and all his experience."

Formerly San Francisco's vocation director (2002-2011) as well as president of Marin Catholic High School (2001-2011), Daly helped institute an annual summer conference for Catholic educators held at the school's Kentfield campus in 2010. Titled "Substantially Catholic," the three-day event drew educators from a wide area to hear presentations on more deeply incorporating Catholic identity in school curricula as well as climate.

The Catholic Education Institute, which Piderit helped found in 2001 and is its president, was the mainstay of the 2010 and 2011 Catholic identity conferences, and Piderit and Morey were primary presenters. Morey is the institute's senior research director.

Piderit and Morey co-authored *Catholic Higher Education: A Culture in Crisis* *[1]* (Oxford University Press, 2006), which focuses on Catholic identity at Catholic colleges and universities.

Morey was a primary contact for the recruitment of Giampietro from the University of St. Thomas in Houston to become executive vice president for advancement and academic dean in July.

While a Catholic seminary is obviously deeply Catholic, Morey said, her research and experience in areas of "Catholic institutional life" certainly come into play at St. Patrick's.

"My particular area of strength is organizational structure, looking at this from the perspective of organization and practice," Morey said.

Alluding to her work at St. Patrick, Morey said, "It is one thing to have a set of theories and assertions, and quite another" to see how those play out in "the real life perspective you get on a day to day basis" in seminary academics, governance and culture.

Morey was hired part-time in August 2011 to help St. Patrick's prepare for an upcoming assessment by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, an accrediting organization.

Based on a 10-member team campus visit Feb. 28-March 2, the WASC report was less than glowing. A repeated concern centered on what WASC said were "laudable goals and good intentions" for classwork but an absence of "mechanisms to assess whether [student] progress has been achieved."

"SPSU lacks evidence as to how faculty members assure that students attain expected student learning outcomes. Dialogues are emerging that involve faculty far more actively in creating these assessment loops, and

the team expects SPSU to make progress in this area before the Educational Effectiveness Review," the report stated.

The report also noted that:

- A strategic plan had been languishing for some time and that it was not clear if the plan had been approved by the board of trustees;
- Turnover in the school's administration was a challenge;
- The school should hire more full-time faculty; and
- Even though the school has a $24 million endowment, there is a "need to develop a long-range finance plan that would address needs for future faculty, staff, facilities, technology, etc."

According to McKearney, the WASC team recommended hiring Morey full-time to help with such issues. She became the full-time provost in February 2012. The WASC EER review is scheduled for spring of 2014.

In a concluding section, the WASC team wrote: "The school clearly has the leadership, administrative staff and systems, financial base, and academic faculty to meet these challenges and to continue to develop into a more excellent school."

While Cordileone "favors a more classical seminary education," McKearney said, there has not been a marked "ideological shift" at the seminary.

For example, the former rector explained, the study and use of Latin is increasingly encouraged, "but this is not a bad thing."

He said priests will need a working use of the language if they are to be able to offer Mass in the 1962 Latin rite encouraged by Pope Benedict XVI in his 2007 apostolic letter, *Summorum Pontificum*. That instruction said the Latin extraordinary form should be made available in any parish where groups of faithful desire it.

While Latin is not currently a requirement, it will probably be, McKearney said, noting that Cordileone has also encouraged greater emphasis on Greek and Hebrew.

McKearney also downplayed negative impacts of more structured weekends now required of St. Patrick seminarians. Evaluation of seminarians' free time had begun under Cordileone's predecessor, Niederauer, and had been encouraged in a 2008 letter from the Congregation for Education following an extensive Vatican visitation of U.S. seminaries.

St Patrick seminarians now attend required extracurricular conferences or seminars on all but one Saturday per month. On Sundays, they are required to return to campus for 5 p.m. community Mass, even if they have attended Mass elsewhere.

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