

10-9-07 - Not your father's seminary

By SUSAN C. THOMSON, National Catholic Reporter

St. Louis - Call him Charlie. Everyone else does. With cropped gray hair and an intense gaze, Dominican Fr. Charles E. Bouchard, 56, arrives for an interview looking corporate-casual in a pressed blue plaid sports shirt. Only for a photo later does he express a preference for donning the habit that marks him as a member of the Order of Preachers.

Last December, saying it was time to do something new, Bouchard announced his decision to resign at the end of this year after 18 years as president of Aquinas Institute of Theology here. Aquinas, founded in 1925 by Dominican priests, is no longer the kind of seminary your father might have known. Like the remaining handful of other graduate theological schools run by religious orders, Aquinas has over the years reinvented itself, packaging its programs anew and opening them to lay women and men pursuing spiritual enrichment, professorial careers or educational, pastoral and administrative jobs once reserved for priests and nuns. Of about 275 full- and part-time students currently only 25 or so are religious-order seminarians. Of the rest, laypeople outnumber all religious two to one; more than half are women; and roughly a dozen are Protestants.

Dominican Fr. Richard A. Peddicord, an associate professor of moral theology at Aquinas and its president-to-be, said he sees Bouchard as succeeding in his role -- navigating often rocky waters -- by being persistent, collaborative and quietly persuasive, "a great communicator ... skilled at articulating mission and getting people to see the value of it."

Bouchard grew up in Superior, Wis., where his parents ran a fishing resort and his father, a marine engineer, was active in Democratic politics. Bouchard attended a minor diocesan seminary in La Crosse, Wis., and at the same time, though not in the same class, was another Catholic leader who now resides just blocks away: Archbishop Raymond Burke. Bouchard went on to attend St. John's University, a Benedictine school in Collegeville, Minn., where he got a bachelor's degree in French, and then to Aquinas Institute -- then based in Dubuque, Iowa -- for his theological training before he was ordained in 1979. A doctorate in moral theology from The Catholic University of America prepared him to become an associate professor of moral theology at Aquinas in 1986. Three years later, he was appointed president.

Under Bouchard's leadership, the school's enrollment has nearly tripled, and programs have expanded in depth and breadth.

For example, 15 years ago Aquinas came up with what Bouchard saw as the "ideal model" for delivering courses toward a master's degree in pastoral ministry to laypeople in dioceses without nearby opportunities for advanced theological study: A diocese would provide classroom space, an on-site director and overnight accommodations for visiting Aquinas faculty members. Students would supplement classroom instruction with online work.

The Oklahoma City archdiocese signed up first and continues. The diocese of Kansas City, Mo., jointly with the archdiocese of Kansas City, Kan., enlisted later as did the diocese of Colorado Springs, Colo. And then came what Bouchard describes as the "biggest disappointment" of his presidency: The two Kansas Cities and Colorado Springs, each under a new bishop less friendly to Aquinas' lay ministry programs, dropped out after a few years. The new prelates of the two Kansas Cities and Colorado Springs were all priests of the St. Louis archdiocese.

Bouchard answers all questions, at times limiting his words, projecting a diplomat's inborn sense of how to disagree without being disagreeable.

"For various reasons the bishops [of Colorado Springs and the two Kansas Cities] either did not support the promotion of laypeople in ministry or did not see this as a good model to prepare for it," Bouchard said. "In one case, a bishop told me that they didn't need people with graduate degrees, that what they really needed were catechists.

“In the other case, the bishop objected to the fact that we were teaching laypeople to preach, and he insisted that it was impossible for laypeople to preach, and I said I disagreed. ... I think some of the bishops were concerned that it would create confusion with the proper role of the priest who preaches the homily.

“Because of two failures and the money and energy required to start a program like that, we just felt that we couldn’t risk that again,” said Bouchard.

But there have been compensating successes. High on that list has been a decade-old master’s degree in health care mission, where senior health care leaders, mostly laypeople, learn “to think theologically about the mission of Catholic health care.” Students meet at the school three or four times a year and otherwise do their work by Internet. The program, unique in the country and nationally recognized, has attracted students from coast to coast. “At one point, we had so many representatives of a typical staff in Catholic health care that we joked about starting our own system,” Bouchard said.

And then there is the program Bouchard is most proud of: a doctorate in preaching. Aquinas is the only Catholic theology school nationally to offer that degree. “It really fits with the Dominican charism, and God knows, the church needs it,” Bouchard said wryly.

Bouchard refuses to be drawn out about his personal stands on such touchstone issues as relationships with the St. Louis hierarchy. For the first years of his presidency, Bouchard worked with the late Archbishop John May, who helped Aquinas move to the St. Louis Jesuit campus in 1981 and gave its programs virtually unqualified support. Then came Archbishop Justin Rigali, who quietly demanded that laypeople stop preaching at the Eucharist -- a practice May had allowed as an exception to canon law. Today, nonordained students and Aquinas faculty preach at midday prayer.

When Rigali was moved to Philadelphia, Archbishop Raymond Burke moved in, soon alienating many a St. Louis Catholic with his take-no-prisoners persona.

“Our communication hasn’t been as good as I wish,” is all Bouchard will say of the St. Louis prelate who years ago signed his yearbook at the minor seminary. Said Bouchard, “Perhaps I am partly to blame.”

Two years ago, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops ordered inspections of all U.S. Catholic seminaries, sparked in part by concerns over homosexuality among would-be priests. At the time, Bouchard was quoted as calling the coming examinations “needlessly offensive” to celibate homosexual priests and seminarians.

In September 2005 a committee of four priests and a laywoman spent several days at Aquinas in what Bouchard says turned out to be not the “gay inquiry” it was widely rumored to be, but a broader look at standards for admission and preparation of priesthood candidates. Weeks later the reviewers’ report came back with what he describes as “numerous factual errors,” so the school returned it -- and is still waiting to hear back.

Peddicord said he counts himself lucky to be inheriting the programs, faculty and “great infrastructure” Bouchard has built.

He’s referring to Aquinas’ move two years ago from a building leased from St. Louis University to new quarters a few blocks away and more than twice as large -- an old adding machine factory, stunningly renovated for \$5 million and financed by an undisclosed amount of debt. Both Aquinas and St. Louis University needed more space.

By Bouchard’s account, the school’s annual budget is \$3.2 million, its endowment stands somewhere short of a relatively negligible \$4 million, and its main source of income is students’ tuition. To make ends meet, he says, the school must “beg for a living,” and not just from alumni, who “don’t generally have the kind of money to become major donors.”

The Lilly Endowment has stepped in with two grants, one for \$1.7 million to build awareness of lay ministry in St. Louis-area parishes, one for \$1.9 million to attract college students to lay-ministry careers. In both cases, the concept has sometimes proved a tough sell, Bouchard said. "I think as a church we're still ambivalent about lay ministry."

Some students arrive at Aquinas already working in church jobs, and others who want them generally find them, he said. "The bigger problem is the career path in lay ministry. Can they advance? Can they end up with a decent salary?"

After he resigns at the end of this year, Bouchard will begin a sabbatical semester at the University of San Diego, beginning Jan. 1 and followed by a job as vice president for theological education for St. Louis-based Ascension Health, with 47 hospitals and 100,000 employees, the nation's largest nonprofit Catholic health system.

As he reflects on his tenure, he acknowledges that one thing has remained constant: jokes about the cozying up in St. Louis of Jesuits and Dominicans. The jokes began when Aquinas was preparing to move to the Jesuit St. Louis University campus. Much was made of the historic rivalry of the two orders, which dates to the 16th century, when they were locked in bitter dispute over the relationship between grace and free will. Even now, Bouchard says he enjoys teasing the Jesuit seminarians in his course on Introduction to Catholic Morality.

"There are about 17 Jesuits in the class, five or six Dominicans, and five or six women," he says. "The Jesuits are very serious. Sometimes I have to tell them I'm teasing them."

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