

SLU forced two priests out, one of them says

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Two popular Jesuit priests at St. Louis University were forced to resign for their student advocacy, one of them said last week, provoking anger from students, parents, alumni and faculty members.

The campus ministry director, the Rev. Michael J. Doody, 58, and another campus minister, the Rev. Barney Barry, 43, resigned after administration officials said Barry was "not an institutional fit" and Doody "created an atmosphere in campus ministry that was not supportive of the administration," according to Doody.

Rich Sykora, 27, a St. Louis University Law School graduate, reacted strongly to the resignations. "That they said Father Barry was not an institutional fit is ridiculous," he said. "If there were any two people on campus who best exemplify the Jesuit mission of doing for others, it was Fathers Barry and Doody."

Kathy Hagedorn, the university's vice president for human resources, confirmed that the two priests had resigned but said the university "does not discuss the reasons for resignations. It's a personnel matter."

According to many members of the St. Louis University community, Doody and Barry were two of the most visible Jesuits on campus. The two men lived among the students and took part in many student activities. Doody, they said, often could be seen driving his blue, three-wheeled golf cart around campus, calling out to students by name, smiling and stopping to chat with whomever waved him down. Doody worked at the university for 16 years and built the campus ministry program.

Barry worked as a campus minister at the university for seven years and taught a class in finance at the school. He was a chaplain and adviser for several campus organizations, including the residential community, the Greek system of sororities and fraternities and the student government association.

Some students said they were saddened when they heard the news.

"It's hard to put into words, but these two were sort of pillars of the SLU community," said Eric Mueller, who will be a senior in the fall.

Others worried that their advocates had been silenced.

"They have always been the voice of the students," said Patrick Reed, who also will be a senior in September. "The only two people in the administration who stood up for us have been wiped out."

In an interview and in a written statement provided to the Post-Dispatch, Doody said he was told on May 16 by Hagedorn and Kathy W. Humphrey, the university's vice president of student development, that Barry had to be fired. Doody said Humphrey cited three incidents in which Barry was disloyal to the university.

The following day, despite Doody's protests, Barry was fired but his termination was later adjusted to reflect that he had resigned, Doody said. One week later, Hagedorn asked Doody to resign, he said.

Doody would not elaborate on the incidents he said Humphrey gave as reasons to fire Barry. More than a dozen students, faculty members, alumni and parents who had spoken with the priests said Barry's comments to the university newspaper about a \$75 fee for graduating seniors (which was eventually revoked) was one of the incidents.

In an April 14 article in the University News, Barry was quoted as saying, "You go to school here and at the beginning of the year you are given set fees, then to have this fee added on at the very end is really an issue of justice."

Students said that at a recent meeting of the student government at which university officials were present, Barry mentioned the fee controversy in an opening prayer. The priest also had sided with students in other matters involving Humphrey's office and the university's office of public safety, according to students. Barry, they said, has even battled with the university president, the Rev. Lawrence H. Biondi, in defense of individual students.

Students said the two men also were effective preachers and that their homilies were, in large measure, what drew 800 to 1,000 students to St. Francis Xavier (College) Church for 10 p.m. Sunday Mass (an event created by Doody) each week.

Elizabeth Hogan, another senior-to-be, called Doody "the father of our university." Doody, she continued, is "everything that SLU stands for and strives to be. He is a man for others who puts students' needs before his own."

Stephen Webber, a senior and a U.S. Marine who recently returned from nine months in Iraq, said it was Doody and the campus ministry office that helped him focus on finishing the semester after finding out he was going to be deployed.

Barbara Schneider, Webber's mother, was one parent who was angry last week.

"When Stephen was gone, the campus ministry office reminded him he was still a part of the SLU community and much of that can be attributed to Father Doody," she said. "What has happened here is illogical and counterproductive."

Another parent, Bernard Giacabazi, wrote a letter - "in sadness and disgust" - to Biondi, explaining that Barry and Doody had contributed to his son Vince's desire to join the Jesuit, or Society of Jesus, order and that the administration's actions gave him "pause about Vince joining the Society of Jesus."

"This is going to affect SLU's reputation and your own as well," he wrote. "I don't believe this is the legacy you want to leave for yourself, but it very well could come to be."

Alumni also were upset.

"These were the face guys of the Jesuit order on campus ... and incredible student advocates," said Adam Meister, a recent graduate and past president of the student body.

Some alumni said Barry had been forced to resign for a free-speech issue.

"Jesuits are known for their open minds and for speaking their minds," said Jim Bachman, 28. "But here they're saying they don't want to hear that people who work for them have their own thoughts. They've lost sight of what a university is for."

The university issued a statement Monday that said, in part, "It is not the policy of the university to terminate employees because they hold views different from the administration. In fact, discussion of differing points of view on issues is encouraged. When employees are terminated or asked to leave, it is for violation of university policies."

Some in the university community were angry that the administration waited until the school year was over to take action against Barry and Doody.

"It's typical and it's another example of the university's cowardice," Sykora said. "Students would not have put up with this if they were on campus."

Richard D. Breslin, a professor and outgoing president of the faculty senate, agreed. "If this was done when the students were here there would have been sit-ins," he said.

Webber said it was the timing that upset him. "The thing that makes me most angry is that they did this in the summer," he said. "There are all these people who won't get to tell them goodbye."

John A. Slosar, an emeritus professor from the School of Social Service, said he believes the decision to get rid of Barry and Doody came directly from Biondi.

"These were two men who were not afraid to tell the emperor he had no clothes," he said. "They did it one too many times and were asked to resign as a result."

Breslin agreed that neither Humphrey nor Hagedorn would have the authority to ask for the priests' resignations. "At a Catholic Jesuit university, one does not monkey with Jesuits unless one has the approval to do so," he said.

Biondi could not be reached for comment, but the statement issued by the university on Monday said, "Any personnel-related recommendation from Humphrey would have been reviewed by (Hagedorn), university Provost Joseph Weixlmann and by the university's general counsel's office before being sent to the president."

The Jesuit order is moving Barry to London for the immediate future and Doody is going on a sabbatical to study at Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, Mass., after a vacation in Tuscany. He said he was leaving the university "with a great deal of sadness."

"Saint Louis University remains challenged," he said. "Are we to mean what we so complacently state about its mission about being men and women for others, about serving the faith in and through the promotion of justice? It is not always clear that we succeed in doing so."