

Cover-Up at Gonzaga U.; September 11, 2006

Jesuit leaders on Friday announced that their predecessors and the then-leaders of Gonzaga University concocted a false story to explain the sudden departure of Rev. John Leary from the Gonzaga presidency in 1969. They said at the time that Father Leary had "health problems." The truth was that he had been given 24 hours by the Spokane police to either leave town or face arrest on charges that he was abusing boys and young men while he was serving as the university's president.

Statements released by the university and the Jesuits alternated between apologizing for the misconduct by Father Leary, which appears to have taken place over a period of years during his presidency, and noting that abuse allegations were not handled the same way at that time as they are now. Father Leary died in 1993 at the age of 75.

Rev. John D. Whitney, superior of the Oregon Province of the Society of Jesus (which includes Washington State), said that officials only recently became aware of the cover-up, while searching for documents needed for lawsuits the order is facing related to abuse allegations. He said that the documents indicated that "an artificial scenario" was created to explain Father Leary's departure.

"I can only surmise that fear of scandal and of harm to Gonzaga University gripped those Jesuits, and led them to accept the offer of the civil authorities," Father Whitney said in the statement. "Fear, however, is not an adequate excuse, and is not consistent with our faith and calling. It may have been a different era - things were handled differently by the Jesuits and civil authorities in the 1960s than they are today - but even in that context, our best practices were not followed."

The information about Father Leary is being released now, Father Whitney said, "so a pastoral healing can begin for those who may have been harmed, and so that all of us can continue to create a culture in which such conduct and fear no longer holds sway."

A spokesman for the Jesuits said that no details were being released on the kind of abuse that took place or who the victims were. He said only that they were teenagers. There are no buildings named for Father Leary at Gonzaga, but the spokesman said that a scholarship fund in his honor would be renamed and that officials would look for any other named honors, and change the names on them.

To some, the admission from the Jesuits is too little, too late. David Clohessy, director of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, issued a statement in which he said that the statement was part of a pattern of church leaders acknowledging the details of wrongdoing only after victims force them to do so - by seeking access to records for court case. And Clohessy questioned the sincerity of the Jesuits, when they call the cover up an "artificial scenario" rather than what Clohessy said it really was: "bald-face lies."

Father Leary served as president of Gonzaga from 1961 to 1969. According to the statements from the university and the Jesuits, allegations were first made against him to the Jesuits in 1966, but Father Leary denied them and no investigation was undertaken. It was only after he faced arrest in 1969 that anything happened, and he left the university.

Rev. Robert J. Spitzer, Gonzaga's current president, said he realized that Father Leary had been "highly regarded by many alumni" and that the announcement "will have significant impact on many people." He said that he wanted to apologize to "those who have suffered," and stressed that the university currently has and enforces procedures for dealing with allegations of sexual harassment.

Between the time Father Leary left Gonzaga and his death, there were no additional reports of abuse allegations, according to Jesuit officials.

One of the things Father Leary did was to found a college: New College of California, an alternative (but accredited and degree-awarding) institution that he created in 1971 in Sausalito and later moved to San Francisco. New College's Web site describes its founder as deeply committed to the humanities, Irish studies, and to non-hierarchical teaching methods. Founding the college apparently allowed Father Leary to offer another "alternative scenario" about why he left Gonzaga. A history of the college offers this founding story:

"Jack, a Jesuit priest and teacher of philosophy, had recently resigned as president of Gonzaga University in Washington State because of his dissatisfaction with the current American model of undergraduate education. He wanted to start over. And so New College of California began as a handful of students and teachers meeting in Jack's Sausalito living room."

Peter Gabel, president emeritus and professor of law at New College, said via e-mail that people there didn't know anything about the reports that came out of Gonzaga on Friday, and that "as far as I know, nothing of the kind occurred during his years at New College."

As for Father Leary's reputation at the college, Gabel said: "In the New College community, Jack was greatly respected as a kind and compassionate human being, a visionary with the chutzpah to start a new experimental college with only \$1,500 and a deep-felt commitment to interdisciplinary learning, and a fine teacher. Because of his efforts, thousands of students received undergraduate, graduate, and law degrees who otherwise would likely have dropped out or led very difficult lives."
