



Sullivan addresses past abuse lawsuits against faculty member

DECEMBER 11, 2013 BY BRIGGS LESAUSAGE

President Julie Sullivan, in an email to the St. Thomas community Tuesday, said the university was aware of sexual abuse allegations made against the Rev. Jean-Pierre Bongila, a current tenured faculty member, prior to his employment at the university in 2005 and that legal counsel helped determine the allegations were without merit.

Bongila was offered a position with the Center for Catholic Studies in October 2004. One month later, a lawsuit was filed against him and the Archdiocese of San Francisco. According to Sullivan, Bongila informed the university about the lawsuit.

Sullivan said then-St. Thomas president the Rev. Dennis Dease, with help from legal counsel, reviewed information regarding the allegations and found there to be “significant evidence discrediting the allegations.” Bongila was offered a job beginning in July 2005.

According to Doug Hennes, vice president of university and government relations, Bongila remains a faculty member. He is listed on St. Thomas’ website as teaching three graduate courses during the fall 2013 semester as a faculty member in the College of Education, Leadership and Counseling and serving as the director of the International Leadership Program.

The November 2004 lawsuit accused Bongila of sexually abusing a female when she was 16 and 17 years old. Sullivan said Bongila denied the allegations. In 2006, the plaintiff and the Archdiocese of San Francisco reached a settlement, and the case was dismissed. Sullivan noted Bongila was not part of that settlement.

Sullivan also said authorities did not file criminal charges against Bongila.

According to Sullivan's email, a second lawsuit was filed against the Archdiocese of San Francisco in February 2007, accusing Bongila of sexually abusing a male under age 18. That lawsuit was dismissed in July 2009 because the plaintiff did not participate in the case. After consulting legal counsel, St. Thomas decided to continue Bongila's employment.

"When allegations are made, we don't presume guilt or innocence," Sullivan wrote. "We carefully review the facts and circumstances of each case and make the determination that we believe is appropriate and in the best interests of our community."

In Tuesday's email, Sullivan said she became aware of the allegations against Bongila in October, and she directed an outside law firm to include the situation in an independent investigation related to clergy sexual abuse allegations that may affect St. Thomas.

As part of the investigation, Sullivan said she asked to be informed "immediately" if any facts surfaced that would warrant placing Bongila on leave.

"At this point, I have not been made aware of any such concerns. When the investigation is concluded, we will assess all of the information and make any appropriate determinations," Sullivan wrote.

Sullivan also said the university began an internal safety review in October.

“At this time, we do not believe there is a safety risk, and we know of no complaints filed with the university against Father Bongila during his time here,” Sullivan wrote in the email.

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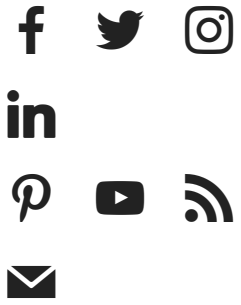
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