

Vincentians give up running seminaries: archbishops in Denver, St. Louis take charge.

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A historic commitment by Vincentian priests to seminary administration in the Midwest and Western provinces of the United States is coming to an end, a victim of the precipitous decline in vocations over the past 30 years.

As a result of the realignment, conservative archbishops with close ties to the Vatican are likely to be exercising tighter control over the education of future priests.

The recent moves, however, do not always fall neatly along a liberal-conservative divide. They are rooted in changes that have rocked the priesthood in the past 30 years and in difficult questions about the future direction of seminaries in the United States.

Two of the most recent, high-profile transitions have occurred in Denver and St. Louis.

In the Denver archdiocese, Archbishop J. Francis Stafford is seeking support for a capital campaign aimed at opening a new center for theological education.

Stafford's quest follows the closing of the Vincentian-owned St. Thomas Seminary in June. Vincentians, formally known as the Congregation of the Mission, cited a recurring financial shortfall in their decision to close the 88-year-old school.

The archdiocese has announced plans to buy the seminary and grounds for \$2.59 million and move archdiocesan offices there.

In the St. Louis archdiocese, meanwhile, new diocesan administrators at Kenrick/Glennon Seminary, recently appointed by Archbishop Justin F. Rigali, are preparing for a fall season in which the Peoria, Ill., diocese, headed by the ultraconservative Bishop John J. Myers, will enroll three of its 28 graduate seminarians. That decision marks a policy change for Peoria, which has not sent men to Kenrick since 1988.

Myers became auxiliary of Peoria in 1987 and was appointed to head the diocese in 1990.

Denver's vice chancellor and director of planning, Fr. Edward Buelt, said Stafford envisions a new seminary rooted in the theology of Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who heads the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The plans are by no means certain and a school is probably several years away, said Buelt.

Meanwhile, the archdiocese has given the go-ahead to the Neo-Catechumenal Way, which plans to train some seminarians in Denver. The Way, a lay organization founded in Spain in 1964 and viewed by many Catholics as strict and ultraconservative, will train priests from around the world to serve a missionary term outside Denver and then return to the archdiocese.

In April, Vincentians, who have operated Kenrick in St. Louis for some 175 years announced plans to bow out of administration, citing a shortage of qualified personnel. The archdiocese owns the building and grounds.

Nationwide, the number of Vincentian priests has dropped from 876 in 1970 to 519 in 1992, according to the Catholic Almanac. The total number of priests in the United States dropped by nearly 10,000 during that same period, from 59,800 to 49,947.

Rigali, appointed to St. Louis last year after the death of Archbishop John L. May, formerly served in Rome as secretary to the Vatican Congregation for Bishops, which oversees the assignment of bishops around the world.

Peoria's decision to renew its ties to Kenrick, which serves about 12 Midwestern dioceses, coincides with Rigali's recent appointment of Myers and another conservative bishop to Kenrick's board of trustees.

Fr. David Kipfer, vocations director in Peoria, said Meyers "will be working closely with Archbishop Rigali" in setting policy for the St. Louis school. The goal of seminary education, in Myers' view, is to form men who "embrace the teaching of the magisterium and then study it," according to Kipfer.

Kipfer said most of Peoria's seminarians currently attend either St. Charles Borromeo in Philadelphia or Mount St. Mary's in Emmitsburg, Md. Those are widely regarded as among the nation's most conservative seminaries.

The other recent Rigali appointment is Archbishop Elden Curtiss of Omaha, Neb. Curtiss headed a delegation of bishops and seminary rectors to St. Meinrad Seminary in Indiana earlier this year. The team's report is regarded as instrumental in the recent firing of Sr. Carmel McEnroy, a tenured theology professor who signed an open letter to Pope John Paul II calling for women's ordination.

Fr. Mark Filips, vocations director in Omaha, said the archdiocese will begin sending "a good portion" of its students to Kenrick now that Curtiss is on the board. Currently the archdiocese uses eight or nine seminaries and sends only three to four of its approximately 20 candidates to Kenrick, Filips said.

Long history ending

With the changes in St. Louis and Denver, Vincentians have ended a long chapter in their history.

In 1987, Vincentians turned over administration of St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, Calif., to the Los Angeles archdiocese, ending a 52-year history of administration there. The changeover occurred two years after Archbishop Roger Mahony was assigned to Los Angeles. Mahony, like Rigali and Stafford, is closely aligned with Pope John Paul II.

As in St. Louis, that change occurred because of a lack of qualified Vincentian administrators, according to Fr. Charles E. Miller, the last Vincentian to serve as rector of St. John's.

Also in the 1980s, a former Vincentian-owned seminary in Perryville, Mo., founded in 1818, was closed as an educational facility. St. Mary's buildings are now used for a museum and retirement center.

Several Vincentian-run high school seminaries have also closed. The only remaining Vincentian school in the Midwest, West or Southern provinces is DePaul University in Chicago, according to Fr. Joe Geders, treasurer for the Vincentians in Chicago. Geders said at least 15 schools owned or operated by the Vincentians in those regions have closed since the early 1970s.

In the recent changes, both archdiocesan and Vincentian officials insist that Vincentians chose to abandon seminary administration and were not forced to do so by church officials.

In fact, Buelt, vice chancellor and director of planning in Denver, said the

order's decision to close St. Thomas had come as a surprise.

"We did not welcome the closure of the seminary," he said. "The archbishop has a long track record of supporting St. Thomas."

Francis X Maier, Stafford's spokesman, noted that Vincentians, at Stafford's invitation, have been given pastoral leadership of the historic Holy Ghost Parish in downtown Denver -- "a sign of the archbishop's cordial relations" with the religious order.

Bishops 'lost confidence'

Still, in a June 16 letter to Denver priests, Stafford said area bishops had "lost confidence" in St. Thomas. The archbishop, reported to be at odds for some time with Vincentians over curriculum, wrote, "Men who were ordained at times found that they had been inadequately prepared for the practical challenges of pastoral work in one or more key formation areas, such as celibacy and the theology of sacred orders."

Stafford noted that only five dioceses sent seminarians to St. Thomas last year, compared to 26 in the 1970s and '80s. Numbers are critical for seminaries, competing as they are for a small pool of men. Nationally, the pool has dropped from 20,000 in the late 1960s to a little more than 1,000 today, according to Joseph O'Hara, research associate for CARA, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. CARA keeps tabs on priestly vocations and seminaries.

Stafford's letter, which reportedly stunned and angered Vincentians, set the stage for a major capital fund drive for the archbishop's seminary plans. The transfer of ownership, Stafford wrote to priests, represented "an opportunity to build an entirely new seminary," one dedicated to Pope John Paul II and centered on the concept of priests as "the new evangelizers."

Maier said The Denver Post had recorded "some of the disappointments" with St. Thomas, but he stressed that the archbishop's letter should not be viewed as critical of the Vincentians.

"We have to look at the realities," he said. "We can't be Pollyannaish. The bishops stopped sending men to St. Thomas. Why? Not because of the cost."

According to The Denver Post, Stafford's criticisms had extended to theologians studied by seminarians at St. Thomas, use of Protestant teachers for some theology classes, and the overall formation program, which includes

study of theology and canon law and development of a seminarian's spiritual life.

"Many good men have been produced by the program," said Maier, "but there's a need for a new kind of formation given the changing cultural environment of the states. St. Thomas did not seem to be meeting the needs of many bishops."

Pope provides vision

Buelt said arguments for establishing a new seminary are both geographic and theological. With the closing of St. Thomas, "there aren't any seminaries in this vast Rocky Mountain-Great Plains region with its unique historical and cultural realities," he said.

"Second, we have this great document the pope issued in 1992," he said. "The Holy Father, in that letter, based upon the reflections of the synod of bishops on priestly formation, repeats the exhortation of the bishops of the world that what is needed for the third millennium is a new urgency to priestly formation to meet the needs of the new evangelization."

Buelt said he and Stafford had met with some 20 bishops of the region in March "to discuss interest in maintaining a seminary in Denver."

He said several were enthusiastic since such a seminary "would not be an attempt to adapt older structures to new needs of evangelization. Because it would be started from scratch, it could be thoroughly imbued with the pope's program of priestly formation and with the program for priestly formation issued by U.S. Catholic bishops in 1993."

Denver officials said the new seminary's curriculum would be modeled in part on the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Washington. The pontifical institute was founded by Pope John Paul II in Rome in 1982. The U.S. campus was established six years later. The school grants a master's degree in theological studies and a licentiate in sacred theology of marriage and family, offered jointly with Mount St. Mary's in Emmitsburg.

Maier stressed, however, that the archdiocese would hold back on plans until they proved to reflect "good financial stewardship." Some sources in Denver feel Stafford will have a hard time garnering support for his plan from Denver Catholics and from other bishops in the region.

This fall, 14 of Denver's 21 seminarians will go to Mundelein Seminary in

Chicago; four to the Josephinum in Columbus, Ohio; one to Sacred Heart in Hales Corners, Wisc. One will study at St. Meinrad; another in Rome.

O'Hara said the Josephinum had shown a strong increase in students last year -- 38 percent. The conservative Mount St. Mary's has had small gains the past two years, 3 to 4 percent.

At Kenrick, nine fewer candidates enrolled last fall than the previous year; 52 students compared to 61, nearly a 20 percent drop, O'Hara said.

Stafford's apparent approval of Mundelein may seem surprising, given that, among Midwestern seminaries, it is generally considered among the more liberal.

Buelt said, "Archbishop Stafford has a great deal of respect for the program of priestly formation that Cardinal (Joseph) Bernardin has instilled at Mundelein. Mundelein has a great deal of pastoral sensitivity in its formation that accords with our pastoral sensitivity."

Maier said it is misleading to label Stafford "conservative." He is progressive in his social policies, though regarded as a strong theological conservative. For example, Maier said, Stafford released a letter last November calling for economic and social justice in the Western Slope region of Colorado, where rapid development has created wide economic disparities.

Another key commonality between Denver and Mundelein is the school's program for Hispanic ministry, Buelt said. People migrating from Mexico often travel first to Denver then to Chicago, he said.

At heart of diocese

As for St. Louis, a news release issued by Vincentians in early April said their decision to resign from seminary administration represented "mutual agreement" at a time when the religious order would ordinarily have been renewing their long-standing contract with the archdiocese.

Vincentian Fr. James Swift, assistant for missions to Fr. John F. Gagnepain, provincial for the Midwest, said the transition resulted solely from a shortage of Vincentians qualified to be administrators.

"We were reaching a point where finding personnel was difficult, and we felt that it was best for the bishop to set the policy and tone for his seminary," Swift said.

Swift said the Second Vatican Council described the seminary as the heart of the diocese. "If it's the heart, there's much more reason for a bishop to be involved in a seminary," he said.

The move to direct archdiocesan control is "a natural evolution," Swift said. Vincentians, founded by St. Vincent de Paul to serve the poor, became seminary teachers and administrators in the United States to help meet the growing need for educated priests in a mission country, he said.

Vincentian educators were drawn to St. Louis early in its history because the first bishop of St. Louis, Bishop Joseph Rosati, was a Vincentian, Swift said. Rosati was appointed to St. Louis in 1827.

Swift noted that two Vincentians will be on the Kenrick staff in the fall, including Fr. J. Dennis Martin, former rector of St. Thomas. Martin will oversee spiritual formation at Kenrick.

"It's true to say that in the past we have focused on education. In future it will not be the focus. We are now moving toward many different kinds of work," Swift said.

Conservative 'skid'?

Regarding the transition at Kenrick, a well-placed source, requesting anonymity, said many Catholics, including some on the seminary staff, are worried that the school is poised for "a skid into the ultraconservative camp."

The school is generally considered more conservative than other Midwestern seminaries, such as St. Meinrad and Mundelein, but moderate compared to, say, Mount St. Mary. Rigali's predecessor, May, was a moderate aligned with Bernardin and other progressive bishops in the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, which he served as president during the 1980s.

So far, though, even liberals find it hard to fault Rigali's administrative appointments at Kenrick.

Msgr. George Lucas, chancellor under May and a generally well-liked priest, is the new Kenrick rector. Auxiliary Bishop Paul Zipfel, widely respected as a pastoral and spiritual leader, has been given oversight of seminary education in his mix of duties.

Rigali has also appointed several laypersons, nuns and priests to the Kenrick

board, along with two other bishops: Bishop James P. Keleher of Kansas City, named this year, and Bishop John J. Leibrecht of Springfield, Mo., named last year.

Lucas said he is unaware of any major changes planned for Kenrick.

"We are looking to build on all these years of priestly formation," he said. "Archbishop Rigali hasn't indicated that there is going to be some big shift. I think he wants the seminary to prepare men for the priesthood in the 21st century -- men who will be familiar and comfortable with the church's teaching and prepared to serve the dioceses of the Midwest. I don't think that's a shift in any way."

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