

Vatican Is Said to Force Jesuit Off Magazine

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An American Jesuit who is a frequent television commentator on Roman Catholic issues resigned yesterday under orders from the Vatican as editor of the Catholic magazine America because he had published articles critical of church positions, several Catholic officials in the United States said.

The order to dismiss the editor, the Rev. Thomas J. Reese, was issued by the Vatican's office of doctrinal enforcement - the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith - in mid-March when that office was still headed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak on the matter, said. Soon after, Pope John Paul II died and Cardinal Ratzinger was elected pope, taking the name Benedict XVI.

America magazine, a weekly based in New York City, is a moderate-to-liberal journal published by the Jesuits, a religious order known for producing the scholars who run many of the church's universities and schools. The Jesuits prize their independence, but like everyone in the church, even their top official, the Jesuit superior general in Rome, ultimately answers to the pope.

In recent years America has featured articles representing more than one side on sensitive issues like same-sex marriage, relations with Islam and whether Catholic politicians who support abortion rights should be given communion. Church officials said it was the publication of some of these articles that prompted Vatican scrutiny.

Father Reese, in a statement yesterday, confirmed his departure but gave no indication that he was resigning under duress: "I am proud of what my colleagues and I did with the magazine, and I am grateful to them, our readers and our benefactors for the support they gave me. I look forward to taking a sabbatical while my provincial and I determine the next phase of my Jesuit ministry."

Catholic scholars and writers said in interviews yesterday that they feared that the dismissal of such a highly visible Catholic commentator was intended by the Vatican as a signal that debating church teaching is outside the bounds.

Some Jesuits said that within the last two years they had received spoken or written warnings from then-Cardinal Ratzinger's office about articles or books they had published.

Stephen Pope, a moral theologian at Boston College who wrote the article critical of the church's position on same-sex marriage, said of the dismissal: "If this is true, it's going to make Catholic theologians who want to ask critical questions not want to publish in Catholic journals. It can have a chilling effect."

Father Reese, who is 60 and has been editor of America for seven years, is a widely regarded political scientist. He has written several books that examine the Roman Catholic Church as a political institution as well as a religious one, a rather secular approach that was not appreciated in Cardinal Ratzinger's office, an official there said in an interview last month.

Jesuit officials said Father Reese was informed of his ouster just after he had returned from Rome, where he had been interviewed by nearly every major American news outlet covering the pope's funeral and the elevation of Cardinal Ratzinger to pope.

He is being replaced by his deputy, the Rev. Drew Christiansen, a Jesuit who writes often on social ethics and international issues, and whom Father Reese recruited to the magazine in 2002.

Catholic experts said yesterday that they were stunned to learn of Father Reese's dismissal. "I'd think of him as sort of a mainstream liberal," said Philip F. Lawler, the editor of Catholic World News, a news outlet on the more conservative end of the spectrum. "I think he's been reasonably politic. I watched him during the transition, and I cannot think of a single thing I heard that would have put him in jeopardy."

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith first complained to Jesuit officials about the magazine four years ago, the church officials said, after America published a special issue with articles criticizing "Dominus Jesus," a document on interfaith relations and the supremacy of Catholicism that had been issued by the Congregation.

Dominus Jesus was broadly denounced by many Catholic and non-Catholic theologians who said it would undermine decades of bridge-building with other faiths, and even with other Christian denominations.

"They were just reporting what a lot of people were saying, they weren't stirring up trouble," said the Rev. Mark Massa, a Jesuit who leads the Center for American Catholic Studies at Fordham University. "I can't think of anything they've reported that was scandalous."

Cardinal Ratzinger's office also complained to the Jesuits about articles America had published on gay priests and on the work of the Congregation itself. The Congregation threatened either to order the dismissal of Father Reese or to impose a committee of censors to review the magazine's content, but backed down after discussions with the Jesuits, church officials said in interviews yesterday.

The magazine then began to more regularly solicit articles examining a single issue from a variety of viewpoints. In 2001, it published a piece Father Reese had solicited from then-Cardinal Ratzinger as a response to an article by Cardinal Walter Kasper, a German who works in the Vatican, that had criticized the Vatican and in particular the Congregation as failing to give local churches and bishops sufficient autonomy.

"For a long while," Cardinal Ratzinger wrote, "I hesitated to accept this invitation because I do not want to foster the impression that there is a longstanding theological dispute between Cardinal Kasper and myself, when in fact none exists."

Then in 2004, the Congregation took issue with two more articles: one by Professor Pope of Boston College on same-sex marriage, which criticized the Congregation for issuing a document that he argued dehumanized gay men and lesbians; and one by Representative David R. Obey, a Wisconsin Democrat, who bristled at bishops who would deny communion to Catholic politicians like himself who support abortion rights.

In both of these cases, Father Reese published opposing viewpoints. Mr. Obey's piece was actually a response to an earlier article in America by Archbishop Raymond L. Burke, now of St. Louis, who had called for Catholic politicians who support abortion rights to change their positions or be denied communion.

The Rev. Richard John Neuhaus, editor of another Catholic journal based in New York, First Things, which is more conservative than America, said yesterday, "It would be fair to say that during the pontificate of John Paul II that America apparently saw itself or at least certainly read as a magazine of what some would describe as the loyal opposition. And, needless to say, there's dispute over the definition of 'loyal' and the definition of 'opposition.'"

But Father Neuhaus added that he considered Father Reese a friend who was always "fair-minded" even when they disagreed.

At the Jesuits' American headquarters in Washington, a spokesman, the Rev. Albert Diulio, said Father Reese and his provincial had jointly agreed on the job change. But he said he did not know if Father Reese had resigned under duress.

The Rev. Thomas Smolich, who as the Jesuit provincial of California is Father Reese's supervisor, said he was discussing with Father Reese about what he would do next. "Tom is a very talented guy," he said. "There are many things he could do in Jesuit and Catholic ministries, in a university, in journalism of some kind."

After the election of Pope Benedict XVI, America ran an editorial that said: "A church that cannot openly discuss issues is a church retreating into an intellectual ghetto."