

Public Statement of the Oregon Province of the Society of Jesus

V. Rev. John D. Whitney, S.J.
Provincial Superior

Friday, September 8, 2006

In the last few weeks, while researching information for submission to the court, the Oregon Province of the Society of Jesus discovered archival notes that indicate that long-dead Jesuit, John Leary, had been involved in the sexual abuse of boys and young men sometime during his tenure at Gonzaga University, where he served as president from 1961 to 1969. Though in more recent years, we had received allegations of such abuse and had settled with some survivors, these newly reviewed documents clarify the course of events, and the uncharacteristic behavior of the Province in dealing with this matter. While today, stronger safeguards and clearer policies are in place, the Jesuits wish to publicly acknowledge the failures of our history and apologize to those who have suffered, in the hope that it might bring some healing and reconciliation.

As we have learned, allegations concerning Leary were first made to the Province in 1966. He adamantly denied these allegations and was allowed to remain in office. While today a more thorough investigation would immediately have begun, in 1966, such an approach was not undertaken.

In April 1969, new allegations were brought to the Jesuits concerning Leary, by Spokane civil authorities, who demanded that he leave Spokane within 24-hours or face arrest. The Provincial and his advisors accepted this offer, creating an artificial scenario, in which Leary was to go to New York and resign for "health reasons." Going briefly to New York then to Massachusetts, Leary was later assigned to positions throughout the western United States. More than 30 years later, no accusations concerning Leary have come forward from those later assignments. Leary died in 1993 at the age of 75.

Though I have dealt with various cases of past sexual abuse by Jesuits in my four years as Provincial, this is the only case in which I find such actions by the leadership of the Province, and I am deeply saddened by it. 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. 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 1960's than they are today—but even in that context, our best practices were not followed.

Though it is painful to recognize the failures of the past, I believe that it is of utmost importance that this information concerning John Leary be made public 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.

The Society of Jesus throughout the Northwest is deeply and profoundly committed to a just and healing course in this case and in all such matters. We seek reconciliation with all who have been harmed, and though litigation may sometimes be unavoidable, we always seek a personal and pastoral approach to find healing and justice. Today we desire not self-protection but the protection, especially, of those who are most vulnerable; and we strive to offer an openness and readiness to all who work for justice and healing. Over the last twenty years, we have instituted new safeguards and new approaches to ministry and community, and we are working now both to heal the past and protect the future.

Most recently, the Oregon Province has entered into a stringent process of accreditation through the Praesidium Religious Corporation, whose nationally recognized programs and policies on abuse risk management and prevention have become the cornerstone of the Province's personnel management guidelines—guidelines that include zero tolerance for illegal activities. If a man is accused of sexual abuse of a minor or other illegal activities, he is immediately removed from public ministry, pending completion of an investigation by the authorities and the Jesuits. A report also is made in accordance with state and Church requirements.

In addition, while Jesuit formation and education requirements have always been rigorous (e.g., it takes 10 to 12 years to be ordained a Jesuit priest), today we look for more than intellect and initiative. We form men to be psychologically mature and aware of their own physical and emotional character. We train them to support one another and to be willing to ask for help. From their first days in the novitiate, we are forming Jesuits who take responsibility for each other and are able to talk about issues of faith and loneliness, desolation and consolation with honesty and forthrightness.

We will never fully know why some Jesuits failed to live the life to which they committed themselves. Likewise, we understand that prayer, repentance, counseling, and financial settlements for victims of abuse will never undo the past. Yet, acknowledgement by the Jesuits and prayer are the first steps. The survivors of abuse deserve our respect and our attention, our acknowledgement and our most sincere apology, without excuses. They deserve to know that we will do everything in our power to prevent such actions from happening again. On behalf of the Society of Jesus, and as a Jesuit, I offer that apology and I make that pledge.

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