

Archbishop denies he fought Curran tenure

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Archbishop Oscar A. Lipscomb of Mobile, Ala., has denied published reports alleging that he tried to influence Auburn University's decision last spring not to give tenure to moral theologian Father Charles E. Curran.

Such assertions were "wrong and gratuitous," he said in a statement Nov. 19 issued after the *Mobile Register* daily newspaper carried an Associated Press story on the academic dispute.

Father Richard P. McBrien, theology department chairman at the University of Notre Dame, has argued that there is strong "circumstantial evidence" that the archbishop had influenced the decision by the state-run university.

Archbishop Lipscomb said he responded to a local press report quoting Father McBrien because it represented "a serious error in fact that does damage to the church because of our precarious position down here."

He said many non-Catholics in the predominantly Protestant state are prepared to believe that Catholics do exercise the kind of behind-the-scenes pressure alleged by Father McBrien, and such comments reinforce such anti-Catholic feelings.

Father Curran, a priest of the Rochester diocese, was appointed last spring to Auburn's "eminent scholar" chair in religion. The position was advertised as tenured, or permanent, but Auburn President James E. Martin last May overruled a faculty committee recommendation for tenure and informed Father Curran he would receive the post only as a one-year appointment.

Archbishop Lipscomb said Father McBrien was "unjust and unfair to Auburn



File photo
Father Charles E. Curran was appointed last spring to Auburn University's "eminent scholar" chair in religion. Despite faculty recommendations for tenure, the university's president appointed Father Curran to the post for one year only.

University and its president" when the priest told The Associated Press that "a tiny minority of Catholics in Alabama has influenced an academic decision at a major state institution."

Father McBrien told CNS Nov. 20 that the evidence of Archbishop Lipscomb's involvement was "circumstantial" but "quite strong." He cited the archbishop's prohibitions against Father Curran being invited to speak at parish-sponsored events and indications that the archbishop spoke with several people about the appointment, including the university's only Catholic trustee, Bessie Mae Holloway.

He said he would retract his comments if the archbishop "denies that he ever had any meeting or conversation that could have been taken as a signal" of displeasure at the appointment.

In a second statement issued Nov. 21,

the archbishop said "any reasonable and unbiased reader" of his earlier statement would have seen it as "a clear and unequivocal denial" of Father McBrien's allegations.

"As a matter of justice to the Catholic faith in Alabama, to Auburn University and to the individuals he has singled out in this matter, I repeat that Father McBrien should offer proof of his charges or retract them with an apology," Archbishop Lipscomb said.

The archbishop told CNS Nov. 20 that in the two discussions touching on the appointment that he had with Holloway, he expressed no opposition.

Archbishop Lipscomb said that in a long conversation this fall with Bishop Matthew H. Clark, he told Bishop Clark that he welcomed Father Curran as an extern priest in good standing residing in his diocese, qualified only by the position that because of the Vatican declaration Father Curran could not be given any official church forum to speak as a Catholic theologian.

He said he likewise limited his comments to diocesan priests and deacons to the issue of not providing Father Curran an official church forum to speak as a Catholic theologian.

He noted that his comments to the

deacons came at a deacon retreat June 1-2, after Martin had told Father Curran in mid-May that he would not be given tenure. Father Curran began teaching at Auburn this fall.

Archbishop Lipscomb issued his most recent statement the day before Auburn's university senate voted to give Martin a Dec. 7 deadline for explaining to its promotion and tenure committee why he denied tenure to Father Curran.

If Martin does not meet the Dec. 7 deadline, the faculty senate decided that it would convene an emergency session, on an unspecified date, of the more than 1,000 Auburn faculty members, according to Richard Penaskovic, chairman of Auburn's department of religion. He told Catholic News Service Nov. 21 that Father Curran did not attend the two-and-a-half-hour meeting, which was devoted entirely to the topic of his tenure.

In a three-page statement to the senate, Martin did not address the controversy between Archbishop Lipscomb and Father McBrien. He said the decision to not grant tenure to Father Curran was made before the priest was offered the one-year appointment.

Archbishop Lipscomb said he received two inquiries from the university last spring regarding the appointment of Father Curran — one from a trustee who asked if the controversial priest's presence at Auburn was an embarrassment to the archdiocese, and the other from a faculty member who asked if he opposed granting tenure to Father Curran.

"To the question of tenure," he said, "I responded that I had neither expressed approval nor disapproval, as I felt it would be both improper and impolitic for me to speak to it."

In 1987 the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith ruled that — because of his ongoing dissent from certain church teachings — Father Curran is no longer eligible to teach as a Catholic theologian.

The Vatican decision led to Father Curran's removal from his post on the theology faculty of The Catholic University of America. He still holds tenure at Catholic University but cannot teach classes or oversee graduate thesis work there. Since his removal he has held temporary posts at Cornell University and at the University of Southern California, where he was teaching when he was offered the Auburn post.

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