

Father Curran takes tenured position at SMU

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — A growing dispute at Auburn University in Alabama over Catholic moral theologian Father Charles E. Curran was short-circuited Dec. 13 when Southern Methodist University in Dallas appointed the Rochester diocesan priest to the Elizabeth Scurlock University Professorship of Human Values.

He will take up the position in the fall of 1991, SMU provost Ruth P. Morgan said.

SMU press spokeswoman Ann Abbas said the professorship, one of two endowed chairs for senior scholars in Christian ethics, carries immediate full tenure.

The Auburn dispute centered around the fact that Father Curran was initially offered a tenured professorship, but at the last minute university President James Martin changed it to a limited, one-year appointment.

Since he was barred from exercising his tenured theology professorship at The Catholic University of America in 1987 — following a Vatican declaration in 1986 that his dissent from certain church teachings makes him ineligible to teach as a Catholic theologian — Father Curran has held a series of visiting or temporary teaching posts at secular universities.

In a phone interview from Auburn, the theologian told Catholic News Service that the SMU professorship was a scholar's "dream."

"The institution takes the ethical and theological enterprise very seriously, thus affording me a most stimulating environment," he said.

He added that the Bridwell Library, the university's endowed theological library, has been described as the best U.S. theology library formed in the 20th century.

Of SMU's 7,500 students, more than 350 are graduate students in its Perkins School of Theology. The school has 32 professors on its faculty. In addition, the university has a religious studies department in its science and humanities school,

with nine full-time and two adjunct professors.

At a press conference at Auburn, Father Curran said he hoped his SMU appointment would enable the Auburn faculty and administration to address the "structural and institutional problems" that led to the tenure dispute surrounding his hiring last spring.

"Now that my person is no longer directly involved, these deeper and underlying concerns can be addressed more directly," he said.

According to a report by an investigating committee established this fall by the university's academic senate, when Martin changed the Curran appointment from a permanent position to a one-year job, he did so under pressure from some trustees and without consulting the committee on promotions and tenure.

In the controversy that ensued over academic freedom and the faculty's role in academic decisions, one fallout was a millionaire benefactor's decision not to build a new \$750,000 laboratory at Auburn for the artificial breeding of horses.

It was that benefactor — J.W. Goodwin, an 86-year-old alumnus who over the years has given his alma mater \$8 million — who had donated \$600,000 to establish the religion chair given to Father Curran, the recently created "Goodwin-Philpott eminent scholar in religion" professorship.

As the dispute grew over alleged behind-the-scenes trustee pressure concerning the chair, Goodwin announced that he has withdrawn his offer to build the horse-breeding laboratory and has written Auburn out of his will.

He said the university would not receive another penny from him until a certain unnamed "power-hungry, money-hungry trustee" was removed from the board.

The week before Father Curran announced his acceptance of the SMU post, the university's promotions and tenure committee met with Martin to hear his reasons for not giving the priest tenure.

In a brief statement afterward, the committee said a majority of its members agreed "that there was no violation of academic freedom and that the president met the letter of the policy on promotion and

tenure concerning his decision in this case."

The statement also said, "The president made clear in his comments that his reservations had nothing to do with moral turpitude or ethical reputation or scholarship."

Ronald Henry, university vice president for academic affairs and chairman of the committee, said after the meeting that he would never reveal Martin's "non-academic" reasons for denying tenure.

Father Curran told CNS that he still has not been informed of the reasons for denial of tenure, but the committee's statement confirmed his belief that the reasons were non-academic.

"From the very beginning I came to conclude that academic freedom had been violated, and everything that has come out since then has confirmed it," he said.

The academic senate, which in November accepted the investigating committee's report and called on Martin to explain his decision to the promotions and tenure committee, was expected to address the issue again at a meeting Jan. 8.



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