

Sabbatical will allow for work on book

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

August 22 will be my last full day as chairman of the department of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

I leave the post with some measure of pride in the faculty I have assembled over the past 11 years. The department is widely regarded now as one of the strongest in its field.

The usual length of service for a department head at Notre Dame is two three-year terms. I was asked in 1988 by the University administration, with the full support of the faculty, to serve a third term.

(My first two terms were four years in duration, including one year of sabbatical leave.)

Last summer and early in the fall semester several members of the department — aware that I was beginning the final year of my third term — asked if I would consider taking a fourth.

I replied that I didn't think the chairmanship was intended to be a "life sentence." Moreover, I felt that I had fulfilled my mandate to put together a first-rate faculty of theology and I was looking forward now to a life without administrative burdens and distractions.

At a testimonial dinner given for me by my colleagues this past May, I was presented with a framed letter of appreciation from the man who first issued the mandate, Father Theodore M. Hesburgh, CSC, now president emeritus of Notre Dame.

Father Edward Malloy, CSC, current president of Notre Dame, professor Timothy O'Meara, university provost, and Father Hesburgh himself all attended and spoke at the dinner, expressing in very generous terms their appreciation for my work on behalf of the department over these past 11 years.

This may sound like a man tooting his own horn, but I think this background is necessary in light of a couple of recent rumors I've heard about my leaving the chairmanship.

One rumor which circulated around the Fort Wayne-South Bend diocese for a time had it that I was being forced out of the chairmanship under pressure from the local bishop, John D'Arcy, as Notre Dame's price for having the university's Sacred Heart Church declared a basilica.

Another rumor, picked up as far away as Boston, had it that I was being forced out because I am about to leave the priesthood and marry.

The first rumor is silly on its face. The

second is mischievous and false. Indeed, I am looking forward to my 30th anniversary of ordination to the priesthood next February 2.

Why the rumors?

One explanation is that the University of Notre Dame failed to issue an immediate press release last fall when my first successor was named. (He has since been appointed dean of the College of Arts and Letters. A second successor will have been announced by the time this column appears.)

Given the importance of the department and my own public status, the university clearly should have issued such a press release. Without it, a vacuum developed for rumors to float in. Although Notre Dame itself may have been partially at fault, there was still no excuse for the way the local diocesan newspaper reported the change.

Today's Catholic, the weekly paper of the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend, noted in a so-called "news" item: "It has been rumored for the past year that he was leaving the chair of the N.D. theology department."

Another explanation for rumors is the natural inclination of some people always to believe the worst. Otherwise, they would have been compelled in this case to



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consider the awful possibility that the circumstances were, in fact, honorable and that I am leaving the chairmanship freely, with great personal satisfaction, and to much — I hope partially deserved — applause, inside and outside the department.

In the meantime, I should want to make the following points unmistakably clear:

- Even though my responsibilities as departmental chairman will soon be completed, I shall be remaining at the University of Notre Dame as Crowley-O'Brien-Walter professor of theology.

- I shall be on sabbatical leave for the next two years to update and revise my "Catholicism" book, to serve as general editor of a new one-volume encyclopedia of Catholicism, and generally to catch up on all the reading in my own field which administrative duties made it impossible for me to do. And I shall be doing all this on campus, here at Notre Dame.

- I shall also continue writing this column.

Agabus' prophecy about Paul is fulfilled

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

"It is time for us to return to the church in Jerusalem," Paul announced one day to some friends he was staying with in Caesarea. "There is much to report to them about the work we have been doing."

A few days later, just before Paul left with some of these followers, Agabus, a prophet from that region, came to see him.

Agabus rushed into the house and went over to where Paul was sitting. He took a belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and cried: "This is what will happen to you in Jerusalem. Your own people, the Jews, will bind you up and turn you over to the Romans for your beliefs."

All of Paul's friends who were present became very upset at the prophet's strange words. They tried to persuade Paul to change his plans. "Don't go to Jerusalem. There is still much work you can do here among us."

Paul only shook his head and said, "There is no need to worry. Don't you all know yet that I am willing not only to be bound but to die for Jesus Christ?"

So the very next day, Paul left for Jerusalem. As soon as he arrived in the city, he went directly to see the elders of the church.

After they had greeted each other warmly, Paul said, "You would be amazed to see how many followers have joined us. These Gentiles are loving, good people. We can learn much from them."

"We are pleased with your apparent success," one of the elders replied. "But, we have received other reports about your work, too."

"What reports?" asked Paul. "Reports that you have turned away from our laws and encouraged not only the Gentiles, but the Jews, to forsake the laws of Moses," the elder replied.

"It's not true," Paul protested. "Why don't you go to the temple tomorrow as a sign of your support," the elder suggested. "That should put all of this talk to rest."

The next day, however, as Paul was praying at the temple, some of the Jews who had spoken against him, shouted: "There is the man who speaks against our laws and the prophets. He has defiled our

temple. Get him out of here!" They kept shouting at Paul until a crowd formed and dragged him from the temple to kill him. As they were beating Paul, a Roman officer and soldiers came to break up the disturbance.

"What have you done?" the commanding officer asked Paul.

"Nothing," Paul replied as they bound him and prepared to take him away. "May I speak to these people?"

The officer nodded to the soldiers and Paul stood on the temple steps above the crowd. When he started speaking to them in Hebrew, the people finally became silent.

"I am a Jew who studied the law under Gamaliel and I believe just as you do," Paul began. "When I first heard about these followers of Jesus Christ, I was convinced that they were committing blasphemy against our God and laws.

"I was the leader of those who persecuted them. One day, I went to the chief priest and asked if I could go to Damascus and arrest some of these followers who had fled there from Jerusalem.

"But on the way to Damascus, I was



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struck down and blinded by a brilliant light. I heard someone ask me, 'Saul, why are you persecuting me?'

"Who are you?" I asked. "I am Jesus Christ, the one you are persecuting."

"What should I do, Lord?" "Your own people in Jerusalem will not accept me. So I am sending you to bring my word to the Gentiles," the Lord told me."

As soon as the crowd heard Paul say this last statement, they became agitated again.

The commanding officer feared the crowd would overtake his officers and kill Paul. So he bound Paul again and let him away to prison for questioning. The prophecy of Agabus had been fulfilled.

Scripture reference: Acts, Chapter 21:7-22:24.

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