



Jim Towey, president of Ave Maria University in Florida. (Credit: Photo courtesy to Crux.)

Ave Maria president wants Church to ‘come clean’ on abuse crisis

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ROME - When Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, a former papal envoy to the U.S., accused Pope Francis of mishandling sexual abuse, one of the few conservative Catholic leaders to rally to the pope’s defense was Jim Towey.

Towey, president of Ave Maria University (AMU) in Florida, lamented the “rift” between conservative members of the U.S. hierarchy and Francis, arguing that in this moment, fidelity toward the pope and the Church is needed more than ever. Towey’s stance drew a sharp rebuke from a group of AMU alumni, who accused him of not taking the clergy sexual abuse crisis seriously.

Towey, whose career has spanned from working inside the White House under President George W. Bush as the Director of the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, to nearly two decades in academia, recently announced he would be departing AMU at the end of next academic year.

Now, two months after speaking out on the pope's behalf, as a further step in what he believes is a crucial time for the Church to finally grasp the scourge of the sexual abuse crisis, he's telling his own story for the first time.

In an interview with *Crux*, he describes the consequences and difficulties of reporting a predator priest in an effort to help the Church "come clean" once and for all.

Reporting a Problem

In June 2009, Towey informed the archabbot of Saint Vincent College in Pennsylvania, where he was then serving as president, that a member of the faculty, Father Mark Gruber, had downloaded pornographic images onto a university computer.

Towey subsequently informed the diocese of Greensburg and the local police and suspended Gruber immediately.

Gruber, who taught anthropology, purportedly enjoyed wide public support on campus and fought back, claiming a student had downloaded the images and reported it to him in the confessional. Soon, according to Towey, Gruber had become a local hero with "Where is Fr. Mark Gruber?" shirts dotting the campus.

In an effort to diffuse the growing controversy, Towey announced in October 2009 he would depart Saint Vincent College a year before his contract was supposed to expire.

As the investigation ensued, a campus IT official discovered that Gruber had made efforts to delete files remotely from his computer that had been confiscated by the police.

The investigation yielded even more damning evidence against Gruber, including nude photos of himself he shared with students on campus, a log of visits to other pornographic youth-oriented sites, and personal writings detailing the priest's sexual fantasies involving naked children, including acts between a 5-year-old and a 16-year-old.

Along with the criminal investigation, Gruber's case was sent to the Vatican for investigation and the diocese suspended his priestly faculties.

In 2010, Gruber, unaware of the evidence that was recovered from his hard drive, went on the offensive, suing the Archabbot of Saint Vincent College, Towey, the academic dean, the IT officer, the college and seminary, the bishop of Greensburg and the diocese of Greensburg.

According to court documents reviewed by *Crux*, during an October 2010 deposition, Gruber originally denied using e-mail aliases and sending nude photographs of himself to campus students, while later, also under oath, admitting to such behavior.

Weeks later, Gruber dropped the lawsuit.

While this would mark the end of Towey and the university's dealings with Gruber, the disgraced priest soon sought revenge in other venues, through continual e-mail harassment, and, according to Towey, efforts to subvert his ability to find new employment.

While asked to comment for this article, Archabbot Douglas Nowicki referred *Crux* to his statements where he praised Towey for his "capable leadership" and as an "exemplary model of deep faith" upon departing the college. He said he still stands by the statement.

In 2010, the *Washington Post* reported that Towey was one of two finalists for president of The Catholic University of America, and although according to some reports he was considered the front-runner, trustees conveyed to Towey that a letter from Gruber to the trustees

read by the board chairman immediately prior to the final vote torpedoed his candidacy.

In July 2011, Towey assumed the presidency of Ave Maria University in Naples, Florida, yet Gruber's efforts to influence Towey's private and personal life intensified. Towey alleges that he had barely started his new job before derogatory emails orchestrated by Gruber arrived in faculty inboxes.

In June 2012, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith sentenced Gruber to a life of prayer and penance after finding him guilty of "possession of child pornography, the crime of production of materials which gravely injure good morals, abuse of the Sacrament of Confession with the aggravating factor of manipulation of conscience, and the defamation of a legitimate superior."

Less than a month later, after resisting the Vatican sentence, he was formally dismissed from the clerical state and monastery by signature of Pope Benedict XVI.

Gruber told *Crux* that an appeals process is underway.

"Present ecclesiastical complexities and civil investigations directly involve persons with roles that play in my laicization and my path toward restoration," he said. "Such paths are slow going in the best of times, but yes, an appeal process informally but substantially proceeds."

Fixing a Crisis

Towey told *Crux* that for years he has kept silent in hopes that Gruber would "admit the damage he has done to so many at Saint Vincent College and elsewhere, and repent."

Yet Towey alleges that Gruber, who is now laicized, continues to plague his career. As recently as the summer of 2018, Gruber was in close collaboration with a former employee of Ave Maria who has

filed a lawsuit over his dismissal, alleging that Towey similarly ruined him.

As the U.S. bishops meet next month - where a focus on revamping policies on child protection is a top priority, specifically holding bishops to the same standards as priests - Towey wants more.

He told *Crux* he's seeking a comprehensive reform where guilty priests are not merely quietly laicized, but a full reporting and accounting of why they were laicized is offered so the public has full disclosure.

"The system is so broken. That's why we face a crisis," he believes.

"Look at what happens when bad priests resign from ministry or get defrocked but still profess their innocence. The Church has had a habit of privately, quietly sidelining these bad priests, thinking this avoids scandal and protects the reputation of the diocese, parish or religious order," he said.

"In reality, this practice actually makes things worse because it fuels suspicion and distrust among the faithful. So, the Church needs to come clean," he insisted.

"When a priest is removed, [the Church should] lay out their findings of fact and air all of the dirty laundry. Stop protecting the morally bankrupt men who disgraced the priesthood but continue to maintain their innocence," he pleaded. "These abusers, when they don't even acknowledge the overwhelming evidence against them and admit what they did, inflict new wounds on victims."

Despite the chaos the Gruber affair has caused Towey, along with his wife and five children, he insists his faith is unshaken. He's merely wanting to play a role in helping the institution finally get this issue right.

"My faith is alive and joyful," he told *Crux*. "I had the good fortune of working closely with Mother Teresa of Calcutta for 12 years, and so I

saw what Catholicism properly lived looks like. Also, I've known many great priests since my childhood and they've been hugely important in my life."

Despite his admiration for priests and prelates alike, he believes that now is the time for enhanced lay leadership.

"One upside [of this situation] is the discovery that the lay vocation is not a second-class one, because there was a time in my life when I believed it was," he said.

"I also won't accept any longer the Church hierarchy's excuses for the snail-like processes they employ in weeding out the bad priests. It shouldn't take lawyers and lawsuits for the Church to do the right thing."

Even so, "Evil never has the last word," he insists. "The truth always wins out."