

Fargo bishop to close college seminary at end of next academic year

FARGO, N.D. - Noting that the cost of subsidizing the local college seminary program had reached \$100,000 per student because of low enrollment, Bishop Samuel J. Aquila of Fargo announced that the diocese would discontinue the program at the end of the 2010-11 academic year.

"It is not good stewardship to underwrite each college-level seminarian at \$100,000 per year," Bishop Aquila said in an April 8 letter announcing the decision. "While subsidies would decrease with higher enrollment, the question of stewardship remains."

Bishop Aquila said he reached the decision about Cardinal Muench Seminary in Fargo after consultation with the College of Consultors, the Diocesan Finance Council, the Seminary Finance Council and the deans of the diocese.

With three students scheduled to graduate May 13 and only seven men registered for the next academic year, "the question also arises as to whether a seminary community of that size can provide appropriate formation for the men in their first years of study and discernment for the priesthood," Bishop Aquila wrote.

In a college seminary, students work toward a bachelor's degree in philosophy while discerning a call to the priesthood. Seminarians who already have a bachelor's degree continue formation for the priesthood at a major seminary.

Bishop Aquila said the annual cost of educating a college seminarian fluctuates depending on the number enrolled and currently averages \$115,000; whereas the annual cost of educating a seminarian in major seminary averages \$35,000. The student at the college level pays \$15,000 per year in tuition, room and board.

"While donors to Cardinal Muench Seminary have been very generous over the years, we are now at the point when we have to recognize that the best use of

donations toward seminarian education is to provide scholarships for our seminarians to attend seminaries elsewhere, rather than trying to fund our local program at an excessive level of expense,” the bishop said.

Cardinal Muench is staffed by four priests, five professors (two of whom are retiring this spring) and eight staff members. Four of the current professors teach at North Dakota State University, Fargo, and are paid by the college seminary, as part of a long-standing agreement with the university. Cardinal Muench Seminary will continue to pay the salaries of the four professors through the end of the 2010-2011 academic year, to fulfill agreed-upon obligations.

In conjunction with the announcement about the college seminary, Bishop Aquila said a review of all seminary properties as well as all Fargo, West Fargo, Horace and Kindred parish and Catholic school properties would begin in June.

“Several area parishes are considering capital campaigns for facility improvements. It would be irresponsible to approve these projects on an individual basis without looking at how the people of the area as a whole are served by our Catholic churches and schools,” Bishop Aquila wrote. “In addition, the cities of Fargo, West Fargo, Horace and Kindred are all growing and this growth must be taken into consideration in the best placement of parishes and Catholic schools to serve the increasing population.”

The review, to be completed within a year, will be conducted by an outside consultant to ensure objectivity, the bishop said.

Details to be studied during the review include location in relation to other Catholic parishes and schools, current and potential membership/student numbers, the number of priests needed at each facility, donation history, integrity of the structures, expansion potential, flooding issues, location in relation to residential or industrial properties, demographic developments and other factors.