

Jesuit university honors Buddhist monks of Myanmar

SAN FRANCISCO – Jesuit Father Stephen A. Privett, president of the University of San Francisco, presented an honorary degree to Buddhist monks from Myanmar Dec. 14, saying the honor would keep their “struggle for democracy in the minds and hearts of those of us who enjoy the freedoms they are struggling to achieve.”

In mid-August, Buddhist monks began leading peaceful demonstrations against spiraling inflation, corruption and the continued suppression of democracy by Myanmar’s ruling military regime. They were joined by tens of thousands of other people in Yangon and other towns.

It was the largest anti-government display since the military violently suppressed a 1988 pro-democracy uprising.

In September, the military reacted with a violent crackdown on the protesters. Thousands of people, including monks, were beaten and arrested; some demonstrators were killed. The government’s official death toll was 10, but a U.N. investigator said 31 died. As many as 700 of the protesters reportedly remain jailed.

“These are extraordinary, modern-day heroes and persons of faith committed to building a better world, even at the risk of arrest, beatings and death,” Father Privett said about the monks. “These are the kind of people we hope our graduates will be.”

The honorary degree was presented during the Jesuit-run university’s annual December commencement ceremonies. It was accepted by a representative of the monks, Sayadaw U Kovida, a monk living in exile in a New York monastery. He also delivered the commencement address.

He himself was imprisoned by the military junta after participating in the 1988 pro-democracy demonstrations in what was then known as Burma.

U Kovida said the University of San Francisco’s tribute was proof that people care

about the suffering of the voiceless at the hands of brutal military regimes around the world.

“This honor gives all of us inside and outside Burma much needed encouragement to carry on with conviction,” he said.

University officials said the monks exemplify their school’s moral commitment to educate minds and hearts to change the world.