New assignment: From Harvard to Catholic Charities

by Richard Higgins in the December 19, 2001 issue

He always said that he was a priest first and a dean second. J. Bryan Hehir made that clear when he accepted the helm of Harvard Divinity School in 1998, declining to take the title (he is officially chair of the school's executive body) or to live in Jewett House, the school's stately deanery on Francis Avenue (he lives at a Catholic parish in Harvard Square). He even kept his part-time job at Catholic Relief Services, commuting each week to Baltimore.

Nevertheless, many at Harvard hoped that he would be smitten by the lure of being a Cambridge don and stay on. Those hopes grew as Hehir, the first Roman Catholic priest to steer the historically Protestant school, helped to lift morale damaged by the departure of the previous dean, worked energetically on new programs, fund raising and needed faculty appointments, and guided the school through an $11 million renovation of its library.

But it was not to be. Hehir, a respected moral theologian and Catholic social ethicist, and a specialist in international issues and theories of just war, announced last summer that he was taking a "new assignment in the church," as he calls it. He surrenders his Harvard faculty appointment—he is professor of the practice in religion and society—on December 31 to become president of Catholic Charities USA in Alexandria, Virginia, one of the nation's largest church-based providers of social service.

While it may be unusual for an Ivy League dean to voluntarily step down for a church-related job, it is entirely characteristic of Hehir.

"What I've done at Harvard I've always done with the knowledge that I am a priest of the Roman Catholic Church and that I need to be accountable to that," Hehir said in an interview with me at his residence, the red brick rectory of St. Paul's Parish in Cambridge. The parish is the historic home of the Catholic chaplaincy at Harvard.

Hehir, 61, a Massachusetts native, is a diocesan priest of the Archdiocese of Boston, which is governed by Cardinal Bernard Law. Law approved Hehir's decision to acquiesce to the pleas of former Harvard president Neil L. Rudenstine to accept the divinity school post, but only if it was not to be long term. "I've always been clear that I've been in a position in which I could be given a church assignment, that there was a sense in which I was on loan to Harvard," Hehir said.

Harvard's new president, Lawrence H. Summers, has appointed a search committee to chose a new dean and is expected to name an interim dean shortly. Harvard officials had been hoping to have a new permanent dean in place by September 2002, but university insiders now say that may be too ambitious.

"Bryan's calm reasoning and unquestioned integrity restored confidence in the divinity school," said Joseph Nye, dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. "One of the shining figures on campus, his presence will be sorely missed."

Hehir's new job, which he has already begun part-time—Hehir was installed as president of Catholic Charities USA during a mass at its annual convention in September—is not all that new, he says. It will engage on a more practical level his longtime academic and intellectual interest in how Catholic social institutions embody and interpret Catholic social and moral teaching.

In Hehir's view, his work at Harvard and for Catholic Charities are two facets of a single theme. "Harvard has been a superb academic setting in which to pursue the work of teaching and research in Catholic social ethics and public policy analysis," he said. "Catholic Charities is a uniquely challenging organization in which to continue this work in the service of the church and society."

Catholic Charities, founded in 1910, is a network of 1,400 agencies that offer direct services such as emergency food and shelter, substance abuse counseling, legal aid to immigrants, job training and care of the elderly and people who have AIDS. The national office focuses heavily on legislative advocacy and policy analysis on a range of issues and provides management training and technical assistance to the local agencies. Those agencies provide services to an estimated 10 million people, Catholic and not. Hehir will direct a staff of about 60 people.

"Much of my academic work has been to examine how the Catholic social tradition, in particular Catholic ideas of social policy, and Catholic institutions relate to each other and how, together, they shape a role for the church in American society," said

Hehir, who will live at a Catholic parish in Alexandria while running Catholic Charities.

“As a church, we tend to produce institutions,” he said, noting the large Catholic institutional presence in such areas as health care, social service and education. “I believe that Catholic social tradition gives you a religious-moral framework to assess social policy goals and other political and economic questions. So how do the tradition and the institutions come together? My premise is that church institutions ought not to work apart from their intellectual vision.”

As head of Catholic Charities, Hehir will be more directly involved in President Bush’s faith-based initiative, of which Hehir has been cautiously supportive. Invoking the notion of subsidiarity—the philosophy of using local institutions to the fullest extent possible—he supports the engagement of all the major social actors, including the state, in the task of social provision.

It was a church assignment—becoming pastor of St. Paul’s in Cambridge in 1992, a post that he held until 1996—that called Hehir away from his last academic post, at Georgetown University, where he was the Joseph P. Kennedy Professor of Christian Ethics. While in Washington, D.C., in the 1980s, Hehir was a policy adviser to the US Catholic Bishops’ Conference and was the chief architect of the group’s influential 1983 statement on nuclear weapons. Among Hehir’s numerous honors are two dozen honorary degrees and a MacArthur Fellowship.

Although his more recent work has focused on Catholic social ethics, it is for his work in the realm of international relations that Hehir is perhaps best known. An authority on humanitarian intervention in international conflicts and just war theory, he took up his part-time duties at Harvard in 1992 as a faculty associate at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs. His most popular course at Harvard has been “The Use of Force,” in which he has sometimes started a dialogue between pony-tailed pacifists and visiting generals whom he had gotten to know while teaching at the National Defense Institute. Hehir has been much in demand as a speaker since September 11, giving talks at Yale, Boston College, Georgetown and the Kennedy Library in Boston.

Hehir gave an unflinching no when asked if September 11 had shaken his faith in God. God is not the architect of evil, he said, and cannot be held to blame when human beings abdicate moral responsibility to each other. Grasping that point, he

said, softens the existential shock. But the attacks still “assault my sense of human solidarity,” he said.

“God has created a world in which great evil and great good can be done, a world that is not predetermined to evil but is capable of evil. Within that framework, decisions are made, relationships are constructed and events occur that people have to assess, address, resist, enhance, etc.,” he said. “When you think about it that way, you move from the nature of God to the nature of human beings, to the realm of moral accountability, evaluation and analysis, and how morality is translated into politics, economics, military terms and law. At that point, we can grasp hold of the problem, and we are not paralyzed.”

While Hehir has some criticism of the means the U.S. is employing in its war on terrorism, he said he did not doubt the overall purpose. “An attack on urban centers, in which the victims are mainly civilians, by a group that has no sovereign status—[responding to] this does seem to me to constitute a just cause,” he said in the interview. But a just cause does not automatically mean that the use of force is the best thing or the right thing to do, he added. And the means by which force is used—it must be measured, proportionate and not target civilians, for example—must constantly be monitored.

“A measured response must hold stringently—without exception—to the basic premise of just war ethics: only those who do evil are subject to attack,” Hehir wrote in an article recently published in *America*, the national Catholic weekly.

The matter of civilian casualties, however, requires some thought, he told me. “Just war teaching does not say that if civilians are killed, the war is unjust. It says that if civilians are targeted, the means used are unjust. I don’t think U.S. policy is based on the targeting of civilian populations, which is not a minor point when you consider that Allied policy during World War II was based on that.

“But you can’t leave the matter rest there,” he continued. “You have to ask, What is happening to civilians in spite of the fact that you are not targeting them? How many are dying and what is causing their deaths? Civilians may die because things don’t go as planned and civilians may die when everything goes exactly as planned. Proportionality has some role to play here. So does risk. As the policy is designed, how much risk are you willing to run that civilians will be killed?”

The moral principles may be complex, but the political common sense behind them is straightforward, he wrote in the *America* piece. “High-tech strikes that destroy the rudimentary infrastructure of an already fragile or impoverished society de facto attack its civil society. We cannot convincingly fight terror if we become identified with technological terror.”

Hehir said that while he was confident that noncombatant immunity was not being violated, he was disturbed by the U.S. use of AC-130 gunships against Taliban troops. The large-caliber guns on the AC-130s “can spew a lot of damage,” he said. “I do not agree morally with the use of antipersonnel weapons.”

Hehir said the war was shifting his thinking on one point. “I’ve always been opposed to covert action, certainly the kind we saw in places like Chile and Guatemala. But the situation in Afghanistan is a different problem, so it’s forcing me to rethink that a little.”

For Harvard Divinity School, which was founded in 1816 to carry forward Harvard’s original mission of training men to the Puritan ministry, the appointment of a Roman Catholic priest as interim dean in 1998—Hehir was appointed permanent chair of a three-member executive committee in 1999—was a first. About one-fifth of the school’s 478 students are Catholic.

Among Hehir’s accomplishments as dean, in addition to the renovation of the library, are the funding and creation of four new professorships—in Islamic, Buddhist and Latin American studies as well as in religion and international conflict.

“Bryan brought a combination of intellectual gifts and practical experience about how religious institutions function,” said Brent Coffin, who directed the divinity school’s Center for the Study of Values in Public Life from 1997 to 2000. “His leaving is a great loss, but I’m struck by how valuable his presence will be in Washington at this time. His voice is much needed in the policy conversation at the national level.’’

Harvard professors also credit Hehir with bringing a sense of healing to the school. “Hehir came at a difficult time in the school’s history and helped us through it with skill and understanding,” said Harvey Cox, a Harvard theologian who is also a member of the search committee for a new dean. “He was admired and respected throughout the university as a true religious public intellectual. And he symbolized in his own person the combination of church connection and academic excellence we try to stand for.”

Students also say they will miss him. Diane Rollert, a master of divinity student, said Hehir was more than just a good administrator and advocate for the school, a quality that was especially evident after the September 11 attacks. “He had a real pastoral presence here that’s going to be missed,” she said.

Hehir said that he will miss the “incredible intellectual atmosphere” and interdisciplinary resources of Harvard, and his regular contact with colleagues and students. But he said he never expected to be permanently ensconced in academe. “It was time for me to take up a church assignment,” he said. And now he is pleased, he said, to have one “at the intersection of the church’s social vision and its institutions.”