Episcopal priest faces scrutiny over nude art photos

by Tim Townsend
September 18, 2012

c. 2012 ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH
ST. LOUIS (RNS) In the middle of the 16th century, Catholic bishops and theologians met sporadically in the city of Trento in northern Italy to discuss the church's response to the Reformation. Over the course of 18 years, the Council of Trent produced documents correcting abuses like indulgences and other corruption.

In 1564, the council ordered that some naked figures in Michelangelo's massive "Last Judgment" fresco in the Sistine Chapel be covered up as a result of the council's dictate that "all lasciviousness be avoided; in such wise that figures shall not be painted or adorned with a beauty exciting to lust."

It will be difficult for critics to compare Michelangelo's nudes with the ones photographed by the Rev. John Blair. Just after the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri launched an investigation of the St. Louis priest, many of his photos of nude models were removed from the Internet.

And yet the diocese's disciplinary board, whose members will decide if Blair's photography constitutes sexual misconduct, will try to answer the same question as Trent's participants 450 years ago: How does the church recognize the beauty of art that depicts God's creation -- the human form -- without seeming to condone "a beauty exciting to lust"?

Blair worked as a spiritual care supervisor at Christian Hospital in St. Louis County. On Wednesday (Sept. 12), after hospital administrators saw the priest's photography, he lost his job.

Blair was not hiding his art. In fact, he could hardly have been more public about it. The 40-year-old priest declined to be interviewed, but he describes himself in several places online as an artist. Much of his photography is of adult female models in classic nude poses; his work has been shown in local galleries and art shows.

Before his page on an online photography website was taken down, Blair described some of his work as including "artistic nudes and fine art erotica." Some of the images involve male and female models in more explicit sexual poses.

"My work is about identifying and affirming the beauty and mystique of the models with whom I work," Blair wrote on his photography page. Many of the models who have commented on the priest's page praise his "professionalism" and "respect."

Blair became a priest in the Episcopal Church in 2000. In 2004, he became rector of All Saints' Episcopal Church. He resigned in 2007 after being accused of what diocesan officials called "an impropriety," though the diocese found no evidence to support the accusation.

The priest is also a member of both the Association of Professional Chaplains and the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, and each has a code of ethics that include rules against sexual misconduct.

Aside from being an Episcopal priest, Blair was a friar in the Episcopal Order of St. Francis, whose website says its members "denounce promiscuity, exploitation and abusiveness in the relationships of any of the brothers."

The order's minister general, Brother Zane Young, said the diocese informed the order about "John Blair's questionable art work." Young subsequently released Blair from his vows and from the order. "He is no longer a brother within the Order of St. Francis," Young said.

Blair is also a monk with Celebrating Life Ministries in Illinois, which "provides healing services" and "spiritual growth programs" for 300 to 400 people each year.

Celebrating Life Ministries co-founder Paul Funfsinn said Blair oversees the ministry's three-year course for those hoping to be licensed as ordained spiritual healers.

Funfsinn said that while Blair's erotic photography "sends up a red flag" and "may step over the line," he is hesitant to form an opinion without first trying to understand where Blair was coming from when he took the pictures.

"If I look at it as art, I can't judge it because it's coming from an individual interpretation," Funfsinn said. "We all have our closets."

The Rev. Daniel Smith, executive officer to Missouri Episcopal Bishop George Wayne Smith, said Blair is being investigated under Canon IV of the church's legal rulings, which includes offenses ranging from "immorality" to "conduct unbecoming a member of the clergy."

The diocese's seven-member disciplinary board will meet with Blair and then give their recommendation to the bishop. His options range from a letter of reprimand in Blair's file to removing his ordination. Blair will have the opportunity to appeal the bishop's decision to a provincial board.

Darren Sherkat, a sociology professor at Southern Illinois University who has studied the religious opposition to pornography, said that churches and other nonprofits are "increasingly sensitive to potential sexual misconduct" but thinks that Blair will "get a fair shake."

"They are addressing the very serious issue of sexual misconduct, but the Episcopal church does not have any kind of sacralized proscription against the display of the human body," Sherkat said. "This is a priest who is pursuing art. He'll be OK."