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Lawyer monk a complex behind-the-scenes player

by Jason Berry

The Benedictine priest who long headed one of the organizations that brought the ire of the Vatican down on U.S. women religious last year is stepping down at the end of this year.

Benedictine Fr. Dan Ward will leave as executive director of the Resource Center for Religious Institutes effective Dec. 31, according to a notice on the center's website dated May 28 and signed by St. Agnes Sr. Hertha Longo, chair of the center's board of directors.

"Fr. Dan believes that now is the time to pass on the leadership ... to slow down and take a sabbatical," the announcement says.

For 14 years, Ward has quietly dispensed advice to religious orders on their canonical and financial rights through the resource center and its precursor organizations. Armed with civil and canon law degrees, he earned a reputation as a complex character and a behind-the-scenes player.

When the Benedictine sisters of Holy Wisdom Monastery in Middleton, Wis., sought dispensations from the Holy See from their vows as Catholic nuns in 2006 and refounded the monastery as an ecumenical community, Ward and the resource center were key advisers, working quietly to avoid the attention of the local bishop in Madison. At risk were the sisters' buildings and land.

"When a group of nuns in a diocese goes out of existence, then all the temporal goods go to the diocese," explained Patrick Wall, a canon lawyer and former Benedictine priest who was a young protégé of Ward's at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minn., in the early 1980s. Wall is now a senior researcher for Jeff Anderson & Associates, a law firm in St. Paul, Minn., that represents thousands of victims of clergy sex abuse.

Ward also assisted nuns in Sacramento, Calif., in the selling of a school that sparked a huge controversy,

according to a spokesman for Bishop Jaime Soto.

In 2009, Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary religious order, which had run a popular girls' high school called Loretto, abruptly announced that the school would close.

The sisters' motherhouse in Wheaton, Ill., had been reduced to 80 sisters, facing elder care expenses. The decision to sell Loretto followed a fundraising campaign of several years that drew nearly \$5 million for renovation of school property. The closure drew heavy media coverage.

Over objections by the board, donors, parents and alumni, the sisters sold Loretto to a charter school for a reported \$8 million, netting \$3 million. When donors and others sued the nuns to recoup a share of proceeds, Soto joined the suit, arguing that the diocese deserved compensation for its help in the renovation.

A California superior court rejected the suit. Although Ward was not a defense counsel on the case, his legal architecture prevailed.

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Ward was at the helm of the resource center when the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a doctrinal assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, charging the group with veering far from official church teaching. The doctrinal congregation ordered a reassessment of a number of LCWR's associations, including with the Resource Center for Religious Institutes.

Speculation at the time -- and that persists -- is that the Vatican had received complaints about the advice the resource center had given religious communities. Some media accounts singled out the center's work with Holy Wisdom Monastery.

Ward told *NCR* in an interview last year that critics had misrepresented the circumstances of the Holy Wisdom Monastery case. The Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life approved the validity of the property transfer, Ward said.

But according to Wall, Ward's work for nuns was secondary to "his biggest role in the last 25 years -- as a consultant lawyer to various monasteries, dioceses and churches in defending them in cases of sexual abuse. Ward has functioned on every single level on the defense side."

Ward refused interview requests for this report.

This May, Minnesota passed legislation eliminating the civil statute of limitations for children who were sexually abused and allowing a three-year window for past child victims to file lawsuits against their perpetrator or the institution that may have allowed the abuse.

"The passing of the bill and Ward's stepping down within 30 days is not a coincidence," Wall told *NCR* July 19. "We expect quite a number of cases to be brought against St. John's, including ones that Dan Ward previously worked on as a canon lawyer, civil lawyer and secretary of OSB Inc., the [Benedictines'] civil corporation."

Heroic in the eyes of many sisters, under fire from sex abuse survivors for his defense work for clergy sex offenders and their communities, who is Fr. Dan Ward?

"A little like a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde personality -- doing good for the nuns, while helping bishops or religious superiors deal with their sex offenders," Wall said.

In the 1980s when Ward was advising religious communities in the early wave of abuse litigation, he told Wall "to get any case settled before it's filed. You do not want to get involved in the civil discovery process."

Wall, now a leading legal advocate for sex abuse survivors, has faced Ward on opposing sides.

Sr. Mary David Walgenbach, head of Holy Wisdom Monastery, said she has "the utmost regard for what Dan Ward and [Resource Center for Religious Institutes] have done for women religious."

"He's worked tirelessly for communities dealing with sexual abuse, helping victims and communities getting back on their feet. He's laid down his life for the church with all of its frailties," she said.

But Ward also has critics. Last fall, four people accused Ward of unwanted sexual advances against them in the 1970s when they were college students at St. John's University in Collegeville, where Ward taught at the time. They sent statements to the Benedictine abbot, according to letters posted by Patrick Marker, of Seattle, on BehindthePineCurtain.com.

The website excoriates St. John's Abbey for concealing abusive monks. In 2002, the abbey announced internal sanctions against 12 monks whose victims had secured legal settlements. Marker, who studied at Collegeville, is an abuse survivor who received a legal settlement in 1989. He says that his purpose in posting the complaints "is to get him removed -- not a lawsuit. Dan Ward helped shield various sexual perpetrators."

The accusations against Ward surfaced six months after the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith posted its doctrinal assessment.

Longo said in a statement by email, "Many of us on the RCRI Board have known Father Dan Ward for many years, both personally and professionally, and have nothing but the highest regard for him and his integrity."

St. John's Abbey responded to questions about Ward with a statement saying that he "has not committed any act of sexual abuse of a minor or vulnerable adult. There is no known investigation of Father Daniel being conducted by any law enforcement, public agency or ecclesiastical body."

The order said, "The website operator [Marker] has engaged in a campaign to condemn Father Daniel to his colleagues and the public without any evidence."

In an email to *NCR* confirming Ward's resignation from the resource center, Br. Aelred Senna, spokesman for St. John's Abbey, said that Ward "remains a monk of Saint John's Abbey in good standing."

[Jason Berry, author of *Render Unto Rome: The Secret Life of Money in the Catholic Church*, writes from New Orleans. This is the last in a series of articles published by *NCR* and GlobalPost.com with funding from a Knight Grant for Reporting on Religion and American Public Life at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism; the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting; and the Fund for Investigative Journalism.]

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