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Jesuit school in Syracuse to appoint laywoman as president, a first

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SYRACUSE, N.Y.

Le Moyne College appears poised to make history by appointing the first laywoman to head a U.S. Jesuit college or university.

Linda LeMura, Le Moyne's provost since 2009, will likely be named the college's 14th president as soon as this week. College officials would not confirm her appointment, saying that a board of trustees vote is expected soon. But a March 24 email to college faculty indicates LeMura's appointment is all but final.

The promotion comes amid a significant decline in the number of Jesuit priests available to head the Catholic order's colleges and a growing need for laypeople to take on leadership positions in church institutions.

Women religious have led Jesuit colleges in at least two previous instances, but LeMura would be the first woman who is not a vowed sister to take the reins as president of a Jesuit school.

The development was something LeMura herself anticipated last year, in a September 2013 story in *Today's CNY Woman*.

"The (church) hierarchy is predominantly male," LeMura was quoted as saying in the Syracuse-based magazine. "The Jesuits, however, tend to be a little bit more progressive in their approach in terms of education and in leadership roles. I think if anyone is going to break the ceiling in terms of the Catholic hierarchy, I suspect that a Jesuit institution will be stepping up to the plate very soon."

St. Ignatius of Loyola, founded the Jesuits, an all-male order that is formally known as the Society of Jesus, in 1540.

The first lay president at a U.S. Jesuit university was appointed in 2001, when John J. DeGioia was named president of Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. Naming a laywoman is the next logical step and more such appointments are likely, Jesuit leaders said.

"The really central thing is (LeMura) is an excellent administrator who knows that school well and that she is very knowledgeable about and committed to the Jesuit system and the Jesuit spiritual tradition," said Fr. Michael Sheeran, a Jesuit who is president of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities.

LeMura will succeed Fred Pestello, who is leaving Le Moyne after six years to become the first permanent lay president of another Jesuit school, Saint Louis University. Marquette University, a Jesuit school in Milwaukee, on March 26 named University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Chancellor Michael Lovell its first lay president.

LeMura's appointment would bring to nine the number of lay presidents at the 28 Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States. Eighteen are led by Jesuits.

Sr. Maureen Fay, a Dominican, was president of the University of Detroit Mercy in Detroit from 1990 to 2004.

Sr. Francis Marie Thrailkill, an Ursuline, served as interim president at Wheeling Jesuit University in West Virginia. She was succeeded by a Jesuit.

LeMura, 53, became the highest-ranking woman at Le Moyne when she was named interim provost in 2007. She is a native of Syracuse, a city of about 144,000 at the center of New York state. She graduated from a Syracuse Catholic high school and earned a bachelor's degree in biology and education from Niagara University, a Catholic school near Buffalo, N.Y. She returned to her hometown, where she earned a master's degree and doctorate in applied physiology from Syracuse University.

Jesuit Fr. Adolfo Nicolas, the superior general, or worldwide leader of the Jesuits, said in October that the leaders in Jesuit higher education must prepare for more lay presidents as the number of Jesuits declines.

The number of Jesuits in the United States has dropped from 6,616 in 1973 to 2,547 in 2013.

When Le Moyne opened in 1946, seven Jesuits (six priests and one brother) served the student body of 250. Two years later, 18 Jesuits were at Le Moyne. In 1993, there were 22 Jesuits at Le Moyne.

Today, 17 Jesuits live on campus. The college enrolls 3,300 students, including 2,400 full-time undergraduates and more than 400 graduate students.

Le Moyne takes its name from Fr. Simon Le Moyne, a French Jesuit missionary who traveled to what is now Syracuse in the 1650s and ministered among the Haudenosaunee, a Native American tribe.

In the last decade, Le Moyne has worked to raise its profile. Its men's lacrosse team has won five national championships, most recently in 2013. The Arrupe Program in Christian Social Ethics for Business, formerly at the defunct Woodstock Theological Center, moved in the fall to Le Moyne.

Fr. Howard Gray, a Jesuit, assistant to Georgetown's president, said a fundamental Jesuit philosophy calls for supporting the full development of all people, no matter their gender. Pope Francis, who is a Jesuit, reinforces that by stressing the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on the role of the laity, Gray said.

"The clerical class has sometimes resisted that," Gray said. "Pope Francis is really calling attention to the fact there is a distinction between a heritage and an obsession. It's meant to be adapted and modified. This is one of those changes."

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