

Ousting of editor viewed as ominous: Thomas Reese leaves Jesuits' America magazine

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Was Thomas Reese, the respected priest-editor of a Jesuit magazine who was often seen on TV during April's papal transition, the latest casualty in a simmering battle between the Vatican and the U.S. Catholic Church?

According to most accounts, Reese was ousted as editor of *America* magazine on May 6 because some U.S. bishops and Vatican officials had grown impatient with his policy of allowing open debate on controversial topics in the New York-based publication.

Those who were already worried about heavy-handed leadership by the Vatican say firing Reese, or pressuring him to resign, sends an ominous signal that the American church is headed for a trip to the principal's office.

"Is Rome's definition of faith simply a matter of absolute assent to every utterance that comes out of Rome and we're all supposed to obey and not question?" asked Tom Roberts, editor of the *National Catholic Reporter*, an independent liberal-leaning newspaper. Roberts said the Reese case revived the two most feared words in journalism and academia: "chilling effect."

During the final days of Pope John Paul II and the election of Benedict XVI, Reese was a sought-after commentator on the church. He was widely respected for providing a candid assessment of both men.

His supporters say his grievous sin was not that he wandered off the theological reservation. Rather, like many American Catholics, he devoted much time and ink to the three D's—debate, dialogue and discussion—that some interpret as a threat to church teaching.

As editor for seven years, Reese opened the magazine to all sides of various issues. In many ways, the back-and-forth was reflective of the magazine's name and the country that prides itself on robust, respectful debate.

By almost any measure, Reese was no raging radical. Nonetheless, he cherished the Jesuits' independent streak. *America's* editorials sometimes leaned slightly left of center, and Reese sometimes expressed dismay at the Vatican's move toward centralized authority, but overall the magazine enjoyed a reputation for balance. Pope Benedict contributed an article in 2001 when, as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, he was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

According to the *National Catholic Reporter* and other media outlets citing unnamed sources, church leaders (including the pope himself) were angered by articles on gay priests, contraception and politicians who supported abortion rights. They were especially concerned that a magazine run by a religious order was sometimes airing the church's dirty laundry.

After several years of complaints— primarily from Ratzinger's old office—Reese was pulled off the magazine. According to Catholic News Service, a Jesuit spokesman in Rome maintained that a resignation “was not imposed” and Reese knew “it was time to go.”

Either way, some say the action only adds to Benedict's reputation as a hard-liner who intends to lead his American flock with a firm hand. “This is going to confirm for a lot of people the worst fears and the lowest opinions . . . they had of Benedict,” said David Gibson, author of *The Coming Catholic Church*.

Starting June 1, Drew Christiansen, *America's* associate editor, will take the helm of the magazine. Christiansen joined its staff in 2002 after serving as a senior fellow at the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University and directing the Office of International Justice and Peace for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops from 1991 to 1998. —*Religion News Service*