

Tom Shanahan

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Gay Student Faces Boot from Queens Catholic College

By Duncan Osborne

A junior at St. John's University may get booted from the school and lose his student visa because the Roman Catholic order that sponsored him and gave him a scholarship withdrew its support after learning he was gay.

"I think the heart of it is harassment because of my sexual orientation," said Gregg Thomas outside an April 20 court hearing in Queens.

The 22-year-old came to St. John's from Dominica, a Caribbean island, in 1996 on a scholarship from the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer or the Redemptorists. The scholarship, worth about \$24,000 annually, paid his tuition, room, board, and expenses at the St. Alphonsus Formation Residence, a Queens property owned by the order. Generally, scholarship recipients go on to join the order.

Thomas charged that, in February, Peter Soussa, the reverend who runs the residence, searched his mail and discovered a copy of Out, a gay magazine. "Thomas was told this was a violation of the order's guidelines. As relations soured, Thomas was offered \$5,000 to

cover his living expenses and told the leave the residence.

Pointing to his visa sponsorship documents, Thomas argued that he and the Redemptorists had, effectively, entered into a contract that required the order to support him until he completed his time at St. John's.

"The conditions would be if I did not perform at St. John's, if I did not participate at the house, and if I participated in any criminal activity," Thomas told LGNY. He was never asked if he was gay nor had any guidelines barring a "sexually active homosexual" or "an advocate for the homosexual lifestyle" been presented to him until after Soussa confronted him, he said.

In their guidelines, the Redemptorists claim to accept members who are "homosexual in orientation" but not "those who have lived the lifestyle." Thomas told LGNY he was gay, but not sexually active. "The closest I ever got to a gay community was my work in [an AIDS hospital]," he said. Soussa and other members of the order launched a campaign to drive him out of the residence, Thomas charged. He refused to leave and, for a

time, he was a "virtual prisoner," he said, because the order threatened to bar his return to the residence if he left. Thomas obtained a restraining order preventing the order from tossing him out. This is a contract dispute, his attorney said.

"All we're asking for is for them to keep the promise they made to him," said Thomas D. Shanahan, an associate at Trainer and Molloy. "We're just seeking one more year of his education."

The Redemptorists have countered with a flood of charges in their court papers. In an affidavit, Soussa charged Thomas had threatened him and other students by "indicating that he had visions of them burning in their beds and wanted to slice me with a knife."

Soussa also informed St. John's and the Immigration and Naturalization Service, by letter that the order would no longer sponsor or support Thomas.

The order had a psychiatric nurse observe Thomas and she concluded, in court filings, that Thomas is "capable of planning and carrying out homicidal behavior."

William Wall, an attorney at Farrell, Fritz who represents the Redemptorists, would not comment on the case except to

say the "police were alerted" Soussa and a second Redemptorist also would not comment.

Thomas denied the essence of the charges, but did concede that he made a threat in one angry exchange in a computer chatroom with a fellow student. Shanahan also fired back. He alleged that other residents at St. Alphonsus are sexually active and distributed a love letter from one resident to another that, if authentic, clearly shows that two men are not abstaining from sex. He added that the author of the letter made a pass at Thomas in 1998.

The parties settled the case on April 20 for an undisclosed sum and, citing a gag order, refused to discuss the case, including whether Thomas would remain at the school. Because the Redemptorists told the INS they would no longer sponsor his visa, he likely will have to leave the country without completing his college education. Thomas still wants to join the priesthood.

"I absolutely do," he said. "Even now I want to pursue my vocation... I believe in the basic foundation, the basic doctrine."

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St. Alphonsus Liguori would turn over in his grave. The 18th-century Italian missionary founded the Catholic Church's Redemptorist order, which preaches the virtues of reaching out to the poor and abandoned. How ironic, then, that a would-be Redemptorist novice residing in a church home in Whitestone, Queens, was himself recently abandoned by the order, which in 1996 had agreed to sponsor the 22-year-old West Indian's education at St. John's University. To participate in the program, the young man sold off his belongings and left his job, apartment and family in Dominica.

The reason for the Redemptorists' withdrawal of their promised support for the young man's education and housing? According to the student, Gregg Alleyne Thomas, the director of the Whitestone home opened a piece of Thomas' personal mail early this year and found a copy of *Out* magazine. This incident, Thomas says, resulted in an ongoing pattern of harassment and, earlier this month, an official written notice that he was kicked out of the Redemptorist community.

The conflict has led Thomas to file a lawsuit in Queens County Supreme Court to force the Redemptorists to honor what he believes is a binding contract, requiring the order to provide him with four full years of financial support and housing while he attends St. John's—where he is a student in good standing who has made the dean's list. He asserts he has done nothing that would free the Redemptorists from these alleged contractual obligations.

Thomas says that after the director of the St. Alphonsus Formation Residence, Reverend Peter Sousa, intercepted that copy of *Out* from his mail, he handed Thomas a copy of sexuality guidelines that apply to Redemptorists who have taken vows of celibacy—a step that Thomas has not yet taken. Thomas also charges that Sousa proceeded to block his access to the residence computers and van, to change the security code on the entrance to the house without giving Thomas the new code and to instruct other students not to talk to him.

Fearing he would not be able to reenter the residence if he left to attend classes at St. John's, Thomas spent five days earlier this month locked in his room. He says fellow residents smuggled food to him. He left the residence only after receiving a copy of a court order enjoining the Redemptorists from restricting his access to the residence, from taking any action to have his student visa canceled and from attempting to withdraw their sponsorship of him at St. John's.

The restraining order was issued on April 12. Thomas filed the lawsuit on April 12, six days after Sousa sent a letter to St. John's notifying the university that Thomas "is no longer a candidate/seminarian for the Redemptorists... [and] will no longer be provided a means of support by the Redemptorist Fathers of NY nor by St. Alphonsus Formation Residence."

When contacted by *NYP* for comment regarding the situation, Sousa declared, "I have nothing to say to you." Several phone messages left with the Redemptorists' attorney, William Wall of Uniondale, Long Island, were not returned. Similarly, attempts to reach the leader of New York's Redemptorist community, George Keveaney, were unsuccessful.

An April 7 letter from Wall to Thomas' attorney Thomas Shanahan explains the Redemptorists' position. "Please be advised that your client...was dismissed from the Redemptorists Formation Program in February of 1999," the letter reads. "In an attempt to help him complete his semester of studies, The Redemptorists permitted him to remain in residence...until March of this year... In one further attempt to help him complete his semester studies, he was offered \$5000 in living expenses. It is my understanding that he rejected that offer. Please be further advised that since Mr. Thomas is no longer a candidate... The Redemptorists will not provide him any further support by way of tuition, living expenses, incidental expenses or the

vacate the Formation Residence no later than the close of business on April 8, 1999."

Although the Redemptorists have not explicitly said why Thomas has been expelled from the program, Shanahan says "the perception of being gay was why he was given the guidelines." Those guidelines, Shanahan explains, say the community should show "the greatest charity toward intending members" such as Thomas—something Shanahan says the community has failed to do.

"They didn't follow those guidelines," Shanahan alleges. "And it is egregious that they would change the locks on his house after they recruited him and brought him over from his country. The audacity, to lock him out of his own building! Their behavior is outrageous."

Asked whether he views himself as celibate and gay, Thomas says, "I aspire to live the celibate life, and I have been doing that to the best of my ability," adding that the Redemptorist program "is a formation process" leading to vows of celibacy—not a program that *requires* celibacy for participation. "Being at Whitestone is not making a decision that I'm going to live the celibate life," he says. Despite the current conflict, Thomas is "still contemplating religious life, but I do not really have any plans to pursue it in a Redemptorist context."

Leaders in the gay Catholic community are outraged by the Redemptorists' alleged treatment of Thomas. "If Thomas' allegations are true, I think the way Father Sousa reacted is very sad, goes against the spirit of the Gospel and certainly shows a lack of respect for Gregg Thomas and his basic humanity," says Charles Cox of Dignity/USA, a Washington, DC-based organization for gay Catholics. "A person's sexual identity is irrelevant as long as the person is living a chaste and celibate life—and has taken the vows," Cox continues.

William Geoffrion, who went through the Redemptorist program at St. John's in the early 1990s and now works for a property-management company in Maryland, says "I'm not surprised to hear" that Thomas has run into conflict. "The Redemptorists are on the conservative side, politically as well as religiously," he says, and asserts that "gays are ostracized by other members of the community." He claims he would be surprised, however, if Peter Sousa behaved intolerantly. "I know him well, but perhaps his position [of authority at Whitestone] has changed him," Geoffrion says. "As a gay male myself," he adds, "I will be deeply disappointed with both Peter Sousa and the Redemptorists. I truly hope the accusations prove not to be true."

Henry Scott, the president of *Out*, is similarly affronted by the Redemptorists' actions. "They seem to be presuming that [Thomas] engaged in homosexual activity and the evidence of this is that he had a copy of *Out*. Reading *Out* says next to nothing about someone's sexuality—it is a bit of a leap to make some assumptions based on that. Their actions seem very wrong and extremely un-Christian, especially given that the Catholic Church professes to a great deal of tolerance to people who are gay. I think he should sue the bastards, and I hope he wins."

VAN SMITH

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