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Roman Catholic sister makes ecumenical history as SFTS dean

San Anselmo, Calif., May 14 – Dr. Elizabeth Liebert will become the first Roman Catholic sister named as dean of a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) seminary this summer when she takes over the position at San Francisco Theological Seminary.

With more than two decades of teaching experience at the 138-year-old seminary in San Anselmo, Calif., Liebert will replace Rev. Dr. Jana Childers, who will step down June 30 after nearly eight years as dean.

“We are particularly pleased to be attaining a historic ecumenical milestone,” SFTS President Phil Butin said. “Dr. Liebert’s deanship is a sterling example of SFTS’s thoroughgoing commitment to ecumenical theological education.”

Facing a critical juncture in seminary history, SFTS will look to Liebert’s passion for education and emphasis on spirituality to forge ahead during tough economic times. On May 6, the Seminary announced action steps to address financial challenges that are affecting all institutions.

“This seems to be the call of God in this moment and time,” Liebert said. “I have some gifts that I hope will be helpful.”

A very popular professor of Spiritual Life at SFTS and a member of the doctoral faculty at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, Liebert never really thought about serving as dean because she enjoys teaching and she is not Presbyterian. Now that the opportunity has presented itself, though, Liebert believes her 22 years of teaching experience at SFTS, her relationship with faculty and students, and in-depth knowledge of the GTU’s many resources provide valuable insights for her new role as dean.

Liebert has support on many levels as she embarks on this calling. Beyond SFTS faculty, students and alumni, Liebert has prayed and sought God’s will with the Sisters of the Holy Names, a congregation dedicated to educational and pastoral ministries.

“Behind me is my whole religious community,” Liebert said. “I know they all stand behind me. They function as my family. We’re always talking and praying.”

A pastoral theologian with a special interest in Christian spirituality, Liebert has authored many books, including *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making* (Westminster John Knox 2008). Already in its second printing, *The Way of Discernment* provides an excellent resource for those who seek God's desire in their decision making. Liebert eloquently points out that seeking God's will is not only a spiritual gift, but also a way of life that can be attained through prayer and reflection with one's faith community.

"Beth Liebert is a person of depth, wisdom and deep faith," Butin said. "She is a non-anxious presence who has earned the respect of our whole faculty. We are delighted that she will be dean of the seminary for the coming three years."

Liebert earned a B.A. degree from Fort Wright College of the Holy Names, an M.A. from Gonzaga University, and an M.A. and Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University.

Already ranking as the first Roman Catholic to hold a tenured faculty position at SFTS, Liebert was director of the Program in Christian Spirituality from 1987-2001. She helped found the Seminary's Master of Divinity Concentration in Christian Spirituality, the Diplomas in the Art of Spiritual Direction and Spiritual Formation studies, and the special emphasis in Christian Spirituality in the Doctor of Ministry. She continues to teach in these programs.

Sam Hamilton-Poore, the current director of SFTS's Program in Christian Spirituality, draws parallels between Liebert and Esther: "For such a time as this,' Mordecai says to Esther, 'you have come.'"

"This is how I feel about Dr. Liebert becoming our next dean of SFTS," Hamilton-Poore said. "A woman of strong and grounded faith, personal and academic integrity, discerning and wise in the ways of systems and social structures, patient, fair, determined, committed to standards of justice, compassion and excellence—her call to serve as dean is covered with the Holy Spirit's *imprimatur*. I believe Dr. Liebert will build beautifully upon Dean Jana Childers' legacy of strong and sensitive leadership."

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San Francisco Theological Seminary, a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) graduate school, has prepared whole leaders for the whole church since 1871. One of the founding members of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, it offers theological degrees at two campuses, in San Anselmo and Pasadena. Its innovative Program in Christian Spirituality is open to clergy and non-ordained individuals. For more information please call SFTS at 1-800-447-8820 in San Anselmo or 1-800-473-8772 in Pasadena. Also find information on our Web site: www.sfts.edu.