

Bishops, college presidents seek dialogue after Notre Dame controversy

WASHINGTON - In the wake of the University of Notre Dame controversy involving President Barack Obama delivering its 2009 commencement address, some U.S. bishops and Catholic university presidents are preparing for dialogue aimed at reaching a consensus about speakers on their campuses.

During the early June conference of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities' board of directors in San Diego, the governing body of the group said they would like to see the U.S. bishops revisit their 2004 statement "Catholics in Political Life," which says it's inappropriate for Catholic institutions to honor or provide a platform to someone who holds positions contrary to the teachings of the church.

Two bishops attending the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' spring meeting in San Antonio told the National Catholic Reporter June 17 they also see a need for dialogue with the U.S. Catholic university presidents about this issue, and perhaps revisit the bishops' 2004 statement.

Though no talks have been scheduled, representatives from both groups said they hoped to have initial discussions before the U.S. bishops meet in November for their annual fall meeting in Baltimore.

A national public debate between some bishops and Catholic higher education leaders erupted this spring after Notre Dame in Indiana announced Obama would be its commencement speaker and receive an honorary degree.

Various bishops and other critics viewed the president as an inappropriate choice because he supports keeping abortion legal.

Some of the bishops said Notre Dame defied their 2004 statement.

A number of Catholic college leaders countered that Obama was being honored for his leadership on other issues that are in line with Catholic social teaching, and that his presence at the 2009 Notre Dame graduation was not an endorsement of the president's position on abortion.

"Something happened that's been disruptive, and that says to me we need to sit down and talk this through to come to some better understanding," said Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., vice president of the U.S. bishops conference, in an interview with the National Catholic Reporter. "I don't think anyone felt good about what took place."

The Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities' board of directors would like to see the bishops update or prepare a successor policy to the 2004 statement regarding honors and platforms for speakers at Catholic institutions of higher education, said Richard A. Yanikoski, president of the group that lists 245 Catholic colleges and universities as its members, including Notre Dame.

"The ACCU is encouraging more dialogue with the bishops, collectively and individually, and not necessarily more documents that are written at a particular moment, but survive indefinitely," Yanikoski told Catholic News Service June 17.

"Ultimately, that is the problem with the 2004 document. It was written in the moment of political heat," during the 2004 U.S. presidential election, he said.

He maintained the 2004 statement is incomplete, has internal ambiguities, uses language that is not consistent with canon law, and that its application is subject to interpretation.

It is possible the bishops will revisit their 2004 statement in the coming months, said Auxiliary Bishop Thomas J. Curry of Los Angeles, chair of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Education, in an interview with the National Catholic Reporter, an independent national Catholic newspaper based in Kansas City, Mo.

Attempts by CNS to reach Bishop Curry were unsuccessful.

"The 2004 statement is analogous to our statement on political activity before each election," Bishop Curry told NCR.

"It's not a matter of faith and morals in the sense that we're defining something," he said. "It's a matter of how we react to a constantly moving situation in the country."

"I don't think you can say, 'OK, we had a 2004 statement and that's the end of it,'" he said. "No, the 2004 statement is a significant statement, it has to be taken into account, but we're in a continual process of thinking and discernment about our relationship with the political situation, which is constantly changing."

The association would also like to see the bishops give a clear definition about the authority local bishops have with regard to Catholic colleges in their jurisdiction, Yanikoski said.

"The issue here isn't a disagreement between bishops and presidents about the immorality of public policies," he said. "It's over what is the role of the campus as distinct from the role of the diocese and the bishop as the leader of the diocese, given the power that the bishop has is extraordinary in the diocese and not limited by the bishop's conference."

Discussions between the bishops and Catholic college presidents will likely begin with the bishops' education committee when it meets this fall, shortly before the November bishops' general meeting, Yanikoski said.

At least one Catholic organization has said it doesn't want the bishops to make any changes to its 2004 statement.

"Lobbying the bishops to back off a perfectly reasonable policy would be a shameful action by the Catholic higher education establishment, and hardly an appropriate response to Notre Dame's betrayal of the nation's bishops and the university's own Catholic mission," said Patrick J. Reilly, president of the Cardinal Newman Society, a Manassas, Va.-based Catholic college watchdog group.

The Cardinal Newman Society launched an unsuccessful campaign for Notre Dame to rescind its invitation to have Obama deliver the commencement address.

"The lesson of the Notre Dame scandal is clear," Reilly said in a June 17 statement. "Even our leading Catholic universities have lost their way, and they need precisely the sort of clear direction from the bishops that the 2004 policy on Catholic honors

and platforms represents.”

Bishop Curry and Yanikoski said it is an issue that should be worked out between the bishops and college presidents.

“I don’t see the policies as absolutes, but as guidelines,” Bishop Curry told NCR. “I think we have to continually revisit it all the time, to see how things are changing.”