

Bishops support Bishop D'Arcy's 'pastoral concern' for Notre Dame

WASHINGTON - Meeting in executive session in San Antonio, the U.S. bishops expressed "appreciation and support" for Bishop John M. D'Arcy of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Ind., especially for "his pastoral concern" for the University of Notre Dame.

In a two-sentence statement made public June 22 in Washington, the bishops also affirmed Bishop D'Arcy's "solicitude for (Notre Dame's) Catholic identity and his loving care for all those the Lord has given him to sanctify, to teach and to shepherd."

The statement made no direct reference to the controversy over the university's decision to have U.S. President Barack Obama as commencement speaker May 17 and to give him an honorary degree or to a recent call by the board of directors of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities for the bishops to revisit their 2004 statement, "Catholics in Political Life."

That document states: "The Catholic community and Catholic institutions should not honor those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles. They should not be given awards, honors or platforms which would suggest support for their actions."

More than 50 bishops voiced their disapproval of Notre Dame's invitation to Obama and decision to give him an honorary degree, with some saying it violated the letter and spirit of "Catholics in Political Life."

Critics of Obama said his support of legal abortion and embryonic stem-cell research also made him an inappropriate choice to be commencement speaker at a Catholic university.

Bishop D'Arcy, whose diocese includes the university, boycotted the commencement, saying Notre Dame's decision to honor Obama had caused a "terrible breach ... between Notre Dame and the church."

In a telephone interview with Catholic News Service June 22, Bishop D'Arcy said he had asked to make a presentation to the bishops on the Notre Dame situation and the bishops' response to his remarks "touched me very deeply."

"It was very strong and very positive," he said. "It far surpassed anything that I'd expected."

Bishop D'Arcy said he could give no details about his presentation but said he thought the bishops "understood the situation better" after his report.

Dennis Brown, spokesman for the University of Notre Dame, told CNS June 22, "Like the U.S. bishops, Notre Dame also has great appreciation and respect for Bishop D'Arcy.

"We have tried to foster a positive relationship with him through the years, and we always have held him in the highest regard," he added.

Two bishops interviewed at the San Antonio meeting by the National Catholic Reporter said they see a need for dialogue with U.S. Catholic university presidents about this issue and left open the possibility of revisions to "Catholics in Political Life."

"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," Auxiliary Bishop Thomas J. Curry of Los Angeles, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Catholic Education, 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."

Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., vice president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, also indicated a need for dialogue in a separate interview with NCR.

"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," he said. "I don't

think anyone felt good about what took place.”