

# Catholic commencements draw high-profile speakers, award recipients

WASHINGTON - Though the University of Notre Dame's May 17 commencement with President Barack Obama's speech dominated news coverage of U.S. Catholic college graduations, other Catholic institutions of higher education have sent their graduates off with memorable ceremonies as well.

The Obama invitation drew criticism from some U.S. bishops and members of pro-life organizations who said the president was an inappropriate choice to speak at a Catholic institution and receive an honorary degree there because he supports legal abortion and embryonic stem-cell research.

Obama was actually mentioned in at least two different commencement addresses, even though the president was not in attendance at those Catholic institutions of higher education.

The commencement speaker at Ave Maria University in Florida - Dr. Thomas Hilgers, an obstetrician from Omaha, Neb. - used his address to sharply criticize Notre Dame's decision to host the president.

Calling Obama "viciously pro-abortion," Hilgers criticized the president's policies while comparing him to the speaker at his own commencement in the 1960s - a young priest whom he said later turned out to be "a denier of the Resurrection, pro-homosexuality and pro-contraception."

Obama has "made available embryonic stem-cell research funds, and as an obstetrician, I am in the cross hairs of Obama's administration," said Hilgers, who received an honorary degree from Ave Maria.

When Patricia McGuire - president of Trinity Washington University - addressed her Catholic institution's graduating class May 17, she, too, mentioned the Obama-Notre Dame controversy, saying it was more than the obvious clash between religious

doctrine and secular politics.

“The real scandal at Notre Dame today is not that the president of the United States spoke at commencement, albeit causing some controversy among Catholics,” she said. “The real scandal is the misappropriation of sacred teachings for political ends. The real scandal is the spectacle of ostensibly Catholic mobs camping out at Notre Dame for the specific purpose of disrupting the commencement address of the nation’s first African American president.

“This ugly spectacle is an embarrassment to all Catholics,” McGuire said. “The face that Catholicism shows to our new president should be one marked with the sign of peace, not distorted in the snarl of hatred.”

Like Notre Dame, some other Catholic colleges invited speakers about whom their local bishops and Catholic groups voiced their disapproval – mostly because of their positions on abortion, embryonic stem-cell research or same-sex marriage.

Others schools invited commencement guests who focused on what graduates will need to compete in today’s society.

Raymond W. Kelly, police commissioner of New York City, urged graduates in Washington at The Catholic University of America’s 120th commencement May 16 to be America’s new idealists.

“Americans are, by nature, generous and optimistic, and we need to reclaim our heritage,” Kelly told the graduates. “You need to reclaim it.”

Graduates at Providence College’s 91st commencement May 17 were told to trust in their values, listen to the inner voice that speaks to them from deep inside, and continue to transform the world through public service.

Award-winning documentary filmmaker Martin J. Doblmeier, a member of the graduating class at Providence College in 1973, delivered the commencement at the Rhode Island Catholic college.

Doblmeier, who majored in theology at the college, described himself as an “average student” and said he never dreamed that one day he’d return to his alma mater to

deliver the commencement address.

“As you go forward from here and create your own success stories, trust in those values that were reinforced at PC,” Doblmeier said. “Let those values guide you to treat others not just as numbers on a spreadsheet – or stepping stones to your monthly quota – but as living, breathing human beings.”

The following is a sampling of commencement speakers at Catholic institutions of higher education for their 2009 graduation ceremonies:

- Dr. Peter J. Pronovost – a critical care physician at Johns Hopkins Medical Center in Baltimore and a 1987 graduate of Fairfield University in Fairfield, Conn., who was awarded a 2009 MacArthur genius grant – delivered the commencement address at his alma mater’s undergraduate graduation ceremony May 17.
- Iowa Democratic Congressman Bruce Braley gave the commencement address at Clarke College in Dubuque, Iowa, May 9.
- Jack Abernethy, CEO of Fox Television Stations, delivered the commencement address at Mount St. Mary’s College in Newburgh, N.Y., May 16.
- Michael Galligan-Stierle, vice president of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, delivered the commencement address at St. Gregory’s University in Shawnee, Okla., May 9.
- Cardinal Marc Ouellet of Quebec gave the commencement address at Thomas Aquinas College in Santa Paula, Calif., May 16.
- U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan delivered the commencement address at the May 14 graduation ceremony at St. Michael’s College in Colchester, Vt.
- Father Stephen C. Rowan, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Portland, Ore., was the commencement speaker at the May 9 graduation ceremony at St. Martin’s University in Lacey, Wash.
- Sharon Daloz Parks, an author and director of leadership for the New Commons at the Whidbey Institute, delivered the commencement address at St. John’s University

in Collegeville, Minn., May 10.

- Karen Ristau, president of the National Catholic Educational Association, gave the graduate school commencement address for the University of St. Thomas May 9.
- Jimmy Fallon, host of "Late Night With Jimmy Fallon," who first rose to fame on "Saturday Night Live," delivered a commencement address at the May 9 graduation ceremony of the College of St. Rose in Albany, N.Y.