

Debate, criticism over college's Catholicity

SAN FRANCISCO - Responding to criticism of the school's decision to honor a controversial South African bishop, the University of San Francisco's president said Catholic universities should provide the church with a forum for changing society constructively through conversation.

Universities are meant to be a leaven in society, said Jesuit Father Stephen Privett.

"Catholic universities show the country a more engaging model of change than the defensive 'We won't talk to anybody who doesn't agree with us' model," he said in an interview with Catholic San Francisco, newspaper of the archdiocese.

"The Gospel calls all of us to be a leaven in society. You can't leaven society if you stay in a drawer," he said.

Father Privett made the comments in an interview prior to the university's May 22 undergraduate commencement.

He was responding to sharp criticism of the school's decision to give an honorary degree to Bishop Kevin Dowling of Rustenburg, South Africa, who has argued that in some limited instances, the use of condoms to prevent the transmission of AIDS is morally justifiable. The bishop also was the commencement speaker.

Bishop Dowling has worked in HIV/AIDS care and prevention since 1992. His diocese runs a clinic, school, day care facility, skills-training center and hospice facility to care for vast shanty communities that grew in the shadow of a local platinum mine.

His remarks on condoms in June 2001 provoked an international debate.

The Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference said in a statement a month later that in cases where one spouse has HIV/AIDS and the healthy partner could contract "this killer disease," married couples "must listen to their consciences" in deciding

how to defend themselves from spreading it to the noninfected partner.

However, the bishops said promoting condom use to combat AIDS was an “immoral and misguided weapon against the disease.”

Father Privett told Catholic San Francisco that he invited Bishop Dowling to the university to honor his work and that of the wider Catholic Church in Africa.

“HIV/AIDS is an epidemic in his diocese and in whole areas of Africa,” Father Privett said. “I think people need to understand the difference between a condom as a contraceptive and a condom preventing the spread of a deadly virus that is literally killing thousands of people in Africa.”

Those who criticized the university for honoring Bishop Dowling questioned the school’s adherence to its Catholic identity because it provided a platform for a speaker who advocates a practice they say is contrary to Catholic teaching.

However, there is no official church position on the use of condoms by married couples to prevent transmission of a virus. The church has always taught that sex outside marriage is morally wrong, and it has no position on whether condoms would make it more or less wrong.

The university also has been criticized for choosing San Francisco District Attorney Kamala Harris, a vocal proponent of same-sex marriage, as its May 23 graduate school commencement speaker. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, a Catholic and Baltimore native who supports keeping abortion legal, addressed business school graduates in May 2007.

University philosophy professor Raymond Dennehy said he thinks said the dialogue Father Privett hopes to encourage is presented in a one-sided manner on campus, with most guest speakers dissenting against church teaching.

“Dialogue is having speakers both pro and con,” Dennehy said. “This is giving an award, and you can bet your bottom dollar that (the university) would not do that if (the speaker) were anti-gay marriage.”

According to Dennehy, the university has set out to form a Catholic identity separate

from the church's teaching on issues like abortion and homosexuality.

As examples he cited the invitation to Pelosi and the appointment of Jesuit Father Donal Godfrey as head of university ministry. The priest, who has written about the church's response to the gay community, is a proponent of gay-friendly theology, according to Dennehy.

"Calling USF a Catholic school is like saying Hillary Clinton is a Carmelite nun," Dennehy said. "USF has chosen to go its own way, and there is no one here to stop them. What is Catholic teaching? What is the so-called 'institutional church' if we don't have to pay attention to it?"