

School angers Catholics over honorary degree pick, insurance coverage

WASHINGTON - The University of San Francisco has angered some Catholics by giving Irish President Mary McAleese an honorary degree even though she has publicly supported gay rights and the ordination of women in the Catholic Church.

A university official defended the honor, stating Ms. McAleese did not address any partisan or religious themes during her acceptance speech on campus Dec. 11, and he said the college's Catholic identity remains strong.

The Jesuit-run university also has been criticized for supplying health insurance that provides abortion coverage.

Though university officials plan to remove a provision in its student health insurance coverage that would pay for an abortion, a Catholic organization complained that the same benefit continues to be offered to the university's employees.

Patrick J. Reilly, president of the Cardinal Newman Society, - a Manassas, Va.-based Catholic college watchdog group - praised the university's swift response to the student insurance coverage, but he called on school officials to drop abortion coverage from the employee health plan as well.

Gary McDonald, assistant vice president of communications and public affairs for the University of San Francisco, said the school was in the process of negotiating with its insurance carrier to drop the abortion coverage for employees, but said the issue had not yet been resolved.

"USF offers two options for employee health insurance, Blue Cross and Kaiser Permanente," Mr. McDonald told Catholic News Service in a Dec. 15 e-mail. "Our Blue Cross claims procedure excludes coverage for surgical abortion. When USF negotiated its contract with Kaiser, we were unable to opt out of the plan's provision for termination of pregnancy."

“USF decided to offer the Kaiser plan because Kaiser is widely considered to be the highest-quality HMO in Northern California,” he said. “It is USF’s strong desire to offer its employees the best health care possible. USF is in the process of working with Kaiser to see if the contract can be renegotiated and the provision eliminated.”

The university was criticized by Catholic organizations and bloggers when they learned the campus’s new student health insurance policy provided coverage for abortions.

The abortion provision was overlooked when officials signed the insurance agreement, Mr. McDonald said.

“It was not the university’s intention to offer this coverage,” he said. “USF supports the Catholic Church’s views on the sanctity of life, at all stages, and we will remove this provision from our student health plan.”

Full-time University of San Francisco undergraduate students are automatically enrolled in the university’s plan unless they can prove they have other, comparable insurance.

“We regret this mistake, and we take full responsibility for not adequately reviewing the contract,” Mr. McDonald said. “We are grateful to those who brought this issue to our attention.”

Some Catholics also questioned why the university would award Ms. McAleese an honorary doctorate of humane letters in a special ceremony despite her public dissent on fundamental church teaching that only men can be priests and her advocacy of homosexual rights.

The Irish president criticized the Catholic Church’s hierarchy in the mid-1990s, saying “If I truly believed that Christ was the authority for the proposition that women are to be excluded from priesthood by virtue simply of their gender, I would have to say emphatically that this is a Christ in whose divinity I do not and will not and cannot believe.”

Ms. McAleese was also a legal adviser to the Campaign for Homosexual Law Reform, an Irish group credited for pushing the Irish parliament to pass a law legalizing

same-sex activity in 1993.

In 2004 the U.S. bishops stated that “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.”

Cardinal Newman Society spokesman Adam Wilson asserted that “USF’s choice of Ms. McAleese to receive an honorary degree clearly violates the bishops’ speakers policy,” and called the selection “quite sad, though unfortunately not surprising.”

Since McAleese did not speak on any subject contrary to church teaching, McDonald said, the school’s Catholic identity remains solid.

Ireland’s president was honored for her pursuit of peace in her country and to commemorate the Irish heritage of San Francisco and the university, he said.