

Some Catholic college students say they'd welcome Obama at graduation

WASHINGTON - Though officials at the University of Notre Dame are taking a lot of heat for inviting President Barack Obama to be this year's commencement speaker, most Catholic college students interviewed by Catholic News Service said they would be thrilled if he spoke at their graduation.

"I'd be honored to have the first black president deliver the commencement speech at my graduation," said Christopher Ward, an 18-year-old Catholic freshman at St. Peter's College in Jersey City, N.J. "I don't agree with Obama's position on abortion, but he is a trailblazer who has accomplished so much. He'd be a real inspiration."

Since announcing March 20 that Obama would speak at the commencement, Notre Dame has been criticized by some U.S. bishops, including Bishop John M. D'Arcy of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Ind., head of the diocese where Notre Dame is located, who announced plans to boycott the event.

Obama supports legal abortion and his administration recently proposed new regulations that would expand the use of federal funds for embryonic stem-cell research. Both are in direct conflict with church teaching.

Some clergy, alumni and Catholic organizations have mounted a campaign seeking to have the university revoke the president's invitation.

But students interviewed by CNS at Catholic college campuses in the Northeast had a variety of viewpoints about the Notre Dame controversy.

"I couldn't care less about the president's position on moral issues, and I don't think his position on abortion makes him a poor choice to speak at a Catholic university," said Lindsay Zahradka, 23, a student at Fordham University School of Law in New York. "I think the students at Notre Dame should be grateful that he chose their school over all of the invitations I'm sure he received this year. I mean, this is the

president.”

But Steve Cirronella – a 20-year-old sophomore at Fairfield University in Fairfield, Conn. – said he was definitely surprised when he learned Obama would deliver the commencement address at Notre Dame, one of the most recognizably Catholic universities in the U.S.

“I have a lot of respect for President Obama, but I don’t think – with his position on life issues – that he is the right choice to be the commencement speaker at a Catholic university,” Cirronella said. “If he were coming to the town of Fairfield, I would definitely try and go to see him speak. I just don’t think he’s the right fit for a Catholic school.”

Cirronella’s friend, Antonio Musto, 19, a religious studies sophomore at Fairfield, strongly disagreed that Obama was an inappropriate choice to speak at a Catholic university or to receive an honorary degree.

“He is a pioneer, someone we can all look up to,” Musto said.

“I think we have to look at the whole package, and not just one issue,” said Matt Pecoraro, a 20-year-old sophomore at Fairfield majoring in philosophy. “Look at how many good things the president is trying to do, for the poor, for those who are marginalized. Aren’t those values the church is always teaching? I think we’re letting one issue bog us down.”

In their criticism of Notre Dame’s invitation, some U.S. bishops referred to their 2004 document, “Catholics in Political Life,” which states in part that “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.”

Norma Diaz, a 21-year-old senior at St. Peter’s College, said she hopes the U.S. bishops will revisit that document after the Notre Dame commencement concludes.

“Notre Dame didn’t choose President Obama because of his position on abortion. They chose him because he has so many other qualities that are good and he’ll be a great inspiration to the graduates to set their goals high and to get involved in

community service,” Diaz said.

“I think it’s unfortunate that the bishops would ask the Catholic schools not to honor someone who is trying to do so many good things – things I’ve been taught by the church are good and virtuous – because they disagree with them on one issue,” Diaz said.

Dorian Long, 21, a junior at Neumann University in Aston, Pa., said he doesn’t understand why the bishops didn’t object to President George W. Bush – a supporter of the death penalty – receiving an honorary degree from Notre Dame when he was the commencement speaker.

“It’s really a double standard, and it sounds pretty discriminatory, if you are going to get all upset about one issue, but not the other, and the church teaches us they are both wrong,” Long said.