

Three U.S. bishops revisit controversy over Obama honor at Notre Dame

WASHINGTON - In two national Catholic publications, two U.S. archbishops and a bishop are revisiting the controversy over the honorary degree conferred on President Barack Obama by the University of Notre Dame.

Retired Archbishop John R. Quinn of San Francisco and Bishop John M. D'Arcy of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Ind., the diocese in which Notre Dame is located, wrote separate articles about the matter for the Aug. 31-Sept. 7 issue of America magazine.

Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan of Santa Fe, N.M., talked about the controversy and how it was handled at a June meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in an Aug. 12 interview with National Catholic Reporter, published in the newspaper's Aug. 26 edition.

Archbishop Quinn said he felt the U.S. bishops' response to the controversy "communicated several false and unintended messages" to the U.S. public, while Bishop D'Arcy said his refusal to attend the commencement ceremonies at which Obama was honored arose from his responsibility to see that Catholic universities "give public witness to the fullness of Catholic faith."

Archbishop Sheehan, as part of a wide-ranging interview with the independent Catholic weekly, said he believed the majority of U.S. bishops agreed with him that "we don't want to isolate ourselves from the rest of America by our strong views on abortion and the other things. We need to be building bridges, not burning them."

"To make a big scene about Obama - I think a lot of the enemies of the church are delighted to see all that," he said.

More than 70 bishops voiced their disapproval of Notre Dame's invitation to Obama and its decision to give him an honorary degree, with some saying it violated the

letter and spirit of 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.”

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.

The bishops discussed the controversy in executive session at their June meeting in San Antonio, and passed a resolution expressing “appreciation and support” for Bishop D’Arcy and affirming his “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.”

In his America article, Bishop D’Arcy said the controversy was not about Obama, a replay of the 2008 elections or “whether it is appropriate for the president of the United States to speak at Notre Dame or any great Catholic university on the pressing issues of the day.”

“This is what universities do,” he said. “No bishop should try to prevent that.”

The central question, Bishop D’Arcy said, is: “Does a Catholic university have the responsibility to give witness to the Catholic faith and to the consequences of that faith by its actions and decisions – especially by a decision to confer its highest honor?”

Bishop D’Arcy said that, in his 24 years as head of the diocese in which Notre Dame is located, “I have never interfered in the internal governance of Notre Dame or any other institution of higher learning within the diocese.”

But he said a bishop “must be concerned that Catholic institutions do not succumb to the secular culture, making decisions that appear to many, including ordinary Catholics, as a surrender to a culture opposed to the truth about life and love.”

Archbishop Quinn, however, said there is “deep and troubled disagreement” among the U.S. bishops about how they should speak about abortion, which he called the “most searing and volatile issue in American public life.”

“A strategy of condemnation” that sanctions public officials because of their stand on abortion “undermines the church’s transcendent role in the American political order,” he added.

Among the false impressions conveyed by that strategy are that the bishops “function as partisan political actors in American life”; that they are “ratifying the ‘culture war mentality,’ which corrodes debate both in American politics and in the internal life of the church”; that they are “effectively indifferent to all grave evils other than abortion”; and that, in the case of Obama, they are “insensitive to the heritage and the continuing existence of racism in America,” the retired archbishop said.

Archbishop Quinn urged the U.S. hierarchy to follow the “policy of cordiality” practiced by the Vatican, which “proceeds from the conviction that the integrity of Catholic teaching can never be sacrificed” but “consistently favors engagement over confrontation.”

“The Vatican shows great reluctance to publicly personalize disagreements with public officials on elements of church teaching,” he said.

Archbishop Sheehan said in the interview that he spoke out strongly in executive session at the bishops’ June meeting against those who opposed the university’s granting of an honorary degree to Obama.

“I said we’ve gotten more done on the pro-life issue in New Mexico by talking to people who don’t agree with us on everything,” he said. “We got Gov. (Bill) Richardson to sign off on the abolition of the death penalty for New Mexico. ... But you know, he’s pro-abortion. So? It doesn’t mean we sit and wait, that we sit on the sides and not talk to him.”

Archbishop Sheehan said the U.S. Catholic Church would “be like the Amish, you know, kind of isolated from society, if we kept pulling back because of a single

issue.”

Asked if there were others who agreed with him, he said, “Of course, the majority.”

“The bishops don’t want to have a battle in public with each other, but I think the majority of bishops in the country didn’t join in with that, would not be in agreement with that approach,” he added.