

## Holy Cross asks Obama to rethink abortion position

John Thavis Catholic News Service | Mar. 31, 2009

ROME -- The head of the Holy Cross religious order that founded the University of Notre Dame has written to U.S. President Barack Obama and asked him to rethink his positions on abortion and other life issues.

U.S. Father Hugh W. Cleary, Holy Cross superior general in Rome, said that when Obama receives an honorary degree from the Indiana university and delivers the commencement address in May, he should take to heart the objections of Catholics who have been scandalized by the invitation.

Cleary asked the president to use the occasion to "give your conscience a fresh opportunity to be formed anew in a holy awe and reverence before human life in every form at every stage -- from conception to natural death."

The 13-page letter, dated March 22, was made available to Catholic News Service in Rome. Cleary also prepared an abridged version of the text as an "open letter" to the president, which was expected to be published on the Web site of America magazine.

Father Cleary's letter began by congratulating Obama on being awarded an honorary doctorate from Notre Dame, and said the university was honored to have him deliver the commencement address.

The visit should be a "teachable moment" for all involved, Cleary said.

He asked the president to take advantage of the occasion to "rethink, through prayerful wrestling with your own conscience, your stated positions on the vital 'life issues' of our day, particularly in regard to abortion, embryonic forms of stem-cell research and your position on the Freedom of Choice Act."

Cleary repeatedly quoted Obama's words at the National Prayer Breakfast in February: "There is no God who condones taking the life of an innocent human being." Sadly, the priest said, legalized abortion implies that a person's choice for personal freedom supersedes this obligation to protect and nurture human life.

"An 'unwanted' child comes in many forms: an untimely presence; a disabled or deformed creature; an embryo of the wrong sex; a child conceived out of wedlock; a child conceived through a hideous crime," he said.

Cleary said the United States has a history of defining the parameters of human life "when it suits our self-interest." One example was slavery, justified by denying that a black human being of African descent was fully human, he said.

Cleary noted that many U.S. Catholics today feel their beliefs are dismissed without the serious attention they deserve. Catholics recognize that they live in a pluralistic society, he said, but also believe they have something vital to say about life issues.

"We want to be taken seriously. We insist on taking ourselves seriously; that is why there has been so much protest and turmoil in regard to your presence at Notre Dame," he wrote.

He suggested that at his Notre Dame appearance Obama speak about how Catholics "can be taken seriously for our faith convictions without being dismissed offhandedly and shunned; it is too offensive to be ignored, it is unacceptable."

Cleary said in his letter that he had been deluged with angry e-mails regarding Notre Dame's invitation to the president. He explained that he has no authority over the decision-making by the university, which is directed by a board of fellows and a board of trustees.

Priests and brothers of the Holy Cross order continue to serve at the university, and the university's president -- at present, Father John I. Jenkins -- is always a Holy Cross priest.

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