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Tutu commencement invitation sparks controversy at Gonzaga

by Dan Morris-Young



Retired Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa listens to a discussion regarding humanitarian leadership at the Clinton Global Initiative in 2011. (CNS/Reuters/Allison Joyce)

SPOKANE, Wash. -- An online petition asking the president of Gonzaga University in Spokane to remove Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu as the school's scheduled May 13 commencement speaker has been countered by another online petition decrying the anti-Tutu effort as "a McCarthyist campaign of fear and intimidation."

Local signers of the petition asking Gonzaga president Thayne M. McCulloh to disinvite the Nobel laureate told the school's newspaper they hoped it would call attention to what they said are the retired churchman's promotion of contraception and same-sex marriage and comments some interpret as anti-Semitic.

McCulloh told *NCR* he saw no reasons to alter the invitation to Tutu. "While we have received messages both positive and negative about our decision to invite Archbishop Tutu, the vast majority of responses indicate that there is great support. People see our invitation as honoring Tutu and the social justice

activism of our institution," he said

Asked about claims that the commencement address and honorary degree violated the bishops' statement, "Catholics in Political Life," McCulloh responded, "It is important to note that the document ... was intended to guide actions as regards Catholic politicians. Since Archbishop Tutu is Anglican, and not an American politician, it is difficult to see how the document applies in this case."

"Moreover," he added, "the Catholic church has a tradition of inviting people from different faiths without demanding that they believe what Catholics believe. The University has been very specific about its basis for inviting and honoring Archbishop Tutu, and these in no way represent 'defiance of [Catholic] moral principles.' "

Gonzaga law school alumnus Patrick Kirby, a primary force behind the anti-Tutu petition, told the newspaper that Tutu's invitation and plans to present him with an honorary degree conflict with a 2004 directive from the U.S. bishops, "Catholics in Political Life."

Kirby's group's petition, containing almost 700 signatures, was delivered to McCulloh on Friday, reported Religion News Service.

The Cardinal Newman Society decried Tutu's commencement invitation on its website in February and recently encouraged support for the petition. The petition itself contains a link to the society's website.

Meanwhile, a counter-petition effort launched by Faithful America "climbed up to 10,800 signatures in less than 48 hours, and is still growing," the organization's director, Michael Sherrard, said Wednesday.

"In the wake of Anna Maria College in Massachusetts being forced to disinvite Vicki Kennedy from this year's commencement, we wanted to make sure that Gonzaga's leaders saw that the faith community overwhelmingly supports Archbishop Tutu and wants them to stand strong in the face of these outrageous attacks from the religious right," Sherrard said.

Letters and calls to Spokane Bishop Blase J. Cupich asking his intervention "have gone unanswered," according to a report on Christian Newswire.

A copy of the petition was delivered to Cupich's office April 13, according to supporter John Weingarten, a GU law school employee who is active in pro-life efforts in the diocese.

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"I think it is important to point out we would not oppose Archbishop Tutu appearing on campus if it was an appropriate academic setting," Weingarten said, "such as a symposium on race relations or apartheid."

He said, "We understand it is an academic setting and we support freedom of speech, and we applaud his heroic work against apartheid. But we are concerned about honoring someone" who publicly espouses moral positions in stark contrast to church teaching.

"When Bishop Cupich was asked in person about Gonzaga honoring this commencement speaker who publicly espouses views in fundamental opposition to the teachings of the Catholic Church and most other Christian denominations, he indicated support for Gonzaga's decision stating Archbishop Tutu is being honored for the work he did to end apartheid in South Africa," the article states.

A diocesan spokesperson told *NCR* that Cupich had departed Spokane for his *ad limina* visit to the Vatican and was not available for comment.

Spokane television station KXLY posted a viewer feedback poll on its website after a report on the controversy of the scheduled Tutu appearance. Respondents were overwhelmingly supportive of the archbishop's invitation to speak.

A permanent deacon from Windsor, Conn., Arthur Miller, told the TV station: "When the apartheid, genocidal government of South Africa destroyed a people, where were those who would dare to believe that Archbishop Tutu should not speak at Gonzaga? Where were they when little black babies were murdered, and black women raped? Archbishop Tutu spoke for the dead and dying. He spoke with a voice that could not be drowned out by brutality and racism ... Even though his voice was beaten, bruised, battered and buried, it rose. ... Yes it rose and told the truth and still speaks the truth. ... He not only needs to speak ... but the many need to listen."

"I don't have any realistic expectations" that the university would cancel Tutu's address, Kirby said in the RNS story, adding, "The goal for me is to bring attention to it and hopefully remind administrators at Gonzaga about their Catholic identity and how far they've wandered away from it."

He said Catholic institutions across the United States are choosing popularity over morality by honoring and hiring people who do not represent Catholic values, which he said sends an unclear message to students.

Read Gonzaga's statement about Tutu.

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