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Conservative Catholics blast upcoming appearance by Kathleen Sebelius at Georgetown University

David Gibson Religion News Service | May. 7, 2012

Last month liberal Catholics were upset over House Republican budget chief Paul Ryan using a Georgetown University platform to defend his hard-line fiscal plan as a natural outgrowth of his Catholic faith. Dozens of Georgetown faculty and administrators wrote a letter welcoming Ryan but blasting his understanding of Catholic teaching and asking him to explain his views during his talk at the university's Public Policy Institute.

Now it is the conservatives' turn: The flagship Jesuit university has announced that Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, a Catholic who has angered conservatives and bishops for overseeing the Obama administration's contraception insurance mandate and other controversial policies, will address the policy institute's graduating class at commencement on May 18.

"The left-liberals who run the show at Georgetown have found a way to signal to the world that the nation's oldest Catholic, and most famous Jesuit, university stands with the Obama administration in its war ... against the Catholic bishops and others who oppose the HHS mandate as a violation of religious freedom and the rights of conscience," fumed Robert P. George, a legal scholar at Princeton University and a conservative Catholic with close ties to Republican causes.

The conservative Cardinal Newman Society, which monitors Catholic schools for any actions it deems a danger to the faith, called the Sebelius invitation "scandalous and outrageous." It set up a website and petition to push Georgetown President John DeGioia to rescind the invitation.

"Georgetown insults all Americans by this honor," wrote the society's president, Patrick J. Reilly. "The selection is especially insulting to faithful Catholics and their bishops, who are engaged in the fight for religious liberty and against abortion." Other conservative Catholics have echoed Reilly and George on online outrage.

A reversal seems unlikely, however.

In announcing the invitation, a Georgetown press release praised Sebelius for leading efforts "to improve America's health and enhance the delivery of human services to some of the nation's most vulnerable populations, including young children, those with disabilities and the elderly." It also hailed her work in implementing President Obama's health care reform law -- which the bishops and conservatives strongly oppose -- for helping "34 million uninsured Americans get health coverage."

Moreover, Washington's Cardinal Donald Wuerl has generally declined to pick a public fight on these issues. In fact, a spokesperson for Wuerl told Catholic News Service he had no comment on the Sebelius invitation.

On Saturday (May 5), a day after the Sebelius announcement, Pope Benedict XVI told a group of American bishops visiting Rome that bishops and universities have to get on the same page when it comes to affirming orthodoxy and avoiding "confusion created by instances of apparent dissidence between some representatives of Catholic institutions and the church's pastoral leadership."

The most vivid example of such "dissidence" was the controversy over University of Notre Dame's 2009 invitation to Obama to give its commencement address and receive an honorary degree. Most bishops objected because Obama supports abortion rights, but the university did not back down.

Sebelius will not be speaking at the main university commencement and will not receive an honorary degree, which was a point of contention for protesters in the Notre Dame case.

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