NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Theologian's disinvite linked to Vatican-supported group

Joshua J. McElwee | Nov. 6, 2012

The University of San Diego canceled a British theologian's fellowship after an influential alumnus and a conservative watchdog group backed by a high-ranking Vatican official protested the appointment to the university's board of trustees.

Tina Beattie, a professor of Catholic studies at London's University of Roehampton known for her work in contemporary ethical issues, was to have begun a two-month fellowship at the university Tuesday, Nov. 6.

University president Mary Lyons informed Beattie that the fellowship had been canceled in an Oct. 27 letter.

Thirteen members of the Catholic university's theology and religious studies faculty and the 47,000-member American Association of University Professors raised concerns about the impact of Lyons' action in separate letters Monday and Tuesday. (See related story: National group: Theologian's disinvite raises 'serious issues' [1] .)

In a letter to Beattie Oct. 27, Lyons alleged the theologian publicly dissented from church teaching. The rescission, which was made public by Beattie Nov. 1, sparked near immediate criticism from prominent theologians in the U.S. and the U.K. who expressed worries [2] that it might have a chilling effect in the academic world.

Among those protesting Beattie's appointment was Thomas McKenna, president of the San Diego-based group Catholic Action for Faith and Family, a non-profit organization backed by Cardinal Raymond Burke, the head of the Vatican's supreme court.

In a statement emailed to *NCR* Monday, Lyons said that her decision regarding Beattie's fellowship was made "without regard to pressure groups or donor influence," but also mentioned the role of benefactors to the founding of the university's Frances G. Harpst Center for Catholic Thought and Culture, where Beattie was to have been a visiting fellow.

While Lyons and a university spokeswoman denied that pressure from outside groups had influence on the decision to cancel Beattie's invitation, McKenna and another San Diego man known for his conservative Catholic viewpoints said in interviews with *NCR* that they had widely expressed displeasure with Beattie's appointment.

Among those they said they contacted were current and former members of the university's board of trustees, San Diego coadjutor Bishop Cirilo Flores, the editor of the diocesan newspaper, and the Cardinal Newman Society.

In her statement Monday, Lyons identified Beattie's signing of an August letter in *The Times* of London along with 27 others, which said it would be "perfectly proper" for Catholics to support civil marriage for same-sex couples as "the heart of this matter."

"It is significant that she signed the letter as a 'theologian,'" wrote Lyons in the statement. "This action is materially different from the exercise of scholarship and teaching appropriate to the role of an academic and whose freedom to do so I consistently defend."

The Harpst Center, wrote Lyons, "exists to provide opportunities for its participants to learn about and encounter the Catholic intellectual tradition in its many dimensions, including its doctrinal, moral, spiritual, social, aesthetic contributions."

"I personally solicited benefactors who understood and support this mission," she continues. "One might assume that those Catholic theologians to whom we offer a public platform and an honorary fellowship ? would give evidence by their own public positions of support for both the mission of the Center and the Catholic character of our university."

Requests to speak directly with Lyons on how she determined what was outside the scope of discussion for theologians were not answered Monday.

Pamela Gray Payton, the university's assistant vice president for public affairs, said in an interview that when the university president had worked with a donor to secure the gift for the Harpst Center, "there were certain understandings as to what that gift would bring."

For the Harpst fellowship, said Gray Payton, "there are some pretty rigid, pretty particular expectations of the speakers and others who might come through this program."

"Taking that into consideration, it was [Lyon's] opinion that [Beattie] would not be an appropriate person to speak in that Center."

Gerard Mannion, the director of the Harpst Center who said he was speaking on his own behalf, disputed Gray Payton's claim that there were clear expectations about how its speakers and fellows should align on church teachings.

That view of the center, said Mannion, is "completely contrary to the understanding of the center and its mission that was communicated to me."

Mannion, an Irish citizen who took the role as the center's director three years ago, said he had inquired about what kind of restrictions the university would place on discussions before accepting his position there.

"I was given assurances that there was no question of interference, that academic freedom would be safeguarded," he said. "I've never been told about such donor positions."

University of San Diego alumnus Charles LiMandri, a local attorney, protested Beattie's appointment. LiMandri has served on the university's alumni board, was president of the national alumni association, and chairman of the university's annual fund.

LiMandri also created a website, "Alumni for a Catholic USD [3]," which protested last April a series of student events focused on gender identity, one of which featured a drag show.

McKenna's organization, according to its website [4], has two episcopal advisors: Cardinal Raymond Burke, a

former archbishop of St. Louis who currently serves at the Vatican as the Prefect of the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura; and San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone, a San Diego native who also serves as the chairman of the U.S. bishops' subcommittee for the promotion and defense of marriage.

LiMandri told *NCR* in an interview Nov. 2 that he began publicly expressing his displeasure about Beattie's appointment after it was brought to his attention "a little over a week ago."

He said he found Beattie's views on same-sex marriage and abortion "over the top, even blasphemous."

"I feel strongly that USD's contribution to academia in general and to the Catholic church in particular is by being faithful to the magisterium of the Catholic church so that students get training in what the church actually teaches and not what some theologian would prefer the church teaches," LiMandri said.

McKenna said he had similar concerns about Beattie's viewpoints, and expressed those with current members of the university's board of trustees, who then expressed them to Lyons.

"There was discussion and there was people manifesting their concern over this," said McKenna. "Definitely, there was pressure brought to clarify the issue."

Mannion, who is also a professor of systematic theology and ethics at the university, said he had not been consulted "at any stage" regarding the rescinding of Beattie's invitation, and became aware only afterward.

Mannion also disagreed with Lyons' contention that Beatties' support of the August letter constituted dissent from church teachings, saying it was "torturous logic."

"There's nothing to dissent from," Mannion said. "The church doesn't have binding teaching on civil same-sex partnerships. It has a position and a preference, but it doesn't actually have a binding teaching. Even were this not the case, the policy on academic freedom should protect her right to sign such a letter, which, after all, urged Catholics to follow their conscience."

Beattie had been expected to deliver reflections at a prayer breakfast Wednesday and to give a presentation at the Harpst Center's signature annual event Thursday, a lecture named in honor of Emilia Switgall, a native Czech who immigrated to the U.S. during the Second World War.

In place of that lecture, Mannion said he was helping organize a public panel discussion on academic freedom in Catholic universities. Students and faculty, he said, were also expected to hold a protest Tuesday afternoon. (See related story: National group: Theologian's disinvite raises 'serious issues' [1].)

Gray Payton disputed that LiMandri's protests had affected Lyons' decision to cancel Beattie's fellowship. "Mr. LiMandri's activities do not have any influence on the president's decisions whatsoever," she said.

Responding to an inquiry about Flores' involvement in the decision, San Diego diocesan chancellor Rodrigo Valdivia said in an email that "Bishop [Robert] Brom and other diocesan officials are convinced that Mr. Limandri and his efforts had no influence in the decision made by the University of San Diego."

Brom, the current bishop of San Diego, is set to reach the mandatory retirement age of 75 in 2013, when he will be replaced in the role by Flores, who as a coadjutor has immediate right of succession to the post.

While several members of the university's board of trustees declined to comment on the matter, two told *NCR* that they learned of the canceled fellowship from media reports.

"All I know about Tina Beattie is what I see in the letter from Dr. Lyons," said Msgr. Lawrence Purcell, a board

of trustees member who is also pastor at the Church of the Nativity in Rancho Santa Fe, Calif.

Asked about what influence financial contributors had on the decision, another board member replied, "the fact is I don't know if that's true or not."

"The trustees have not been informed officially about this," said that member, who asked not to be named.

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