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Vatican adviser publicly supports dis-invited theologian

Joshua J. McElwee | Nov. 9, 2012 NCR Today

The head of the U.K.'s theological membership society, an adviser to one of the Vatican's pontifical councils, has publicly supported a British theologian whose fellowship at the University of San Diego was canceled.

Paul D. Murray, the president of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain and a consultor to the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, has expressed his support for Tina Beattie, a theologian known for her work in contemporary ethical issues.

Beattie was scheduled to begin a fellowship at the University of San Diego's Frances G. Harpst Center for Catholic Thought and Culture on Tuesday. University president Mary Lyons, who alleges the theologian publicly dissented from church teaching by suggesting Catholics could support civil same-sex marriage, canceled the appointment [1] in an Oct. 27 letter.

Writing in a letter to Lyons made public in the British Catholic weekly *The Tablet*, where Beattie is a board member, Murray acknowledges the "very difficult position" Lyons must have faced in making her decision.

But he also says he wants to emphasize the "vital importance for the health of the church" in "showing what it means to have a mature capacity for conversation that transcends the destructive and disordered polemic marring too much of contemporary social, political and religious culture."

"This must surely be central to any significant Catholic presence in the university world," writes [2] Murray, a professor in the department of theology and religion at the U.K.'s Durham University.

Murray's letter comes after wide criticism of Lyons' decision in the Beattie case. Prominent theologians in the U.S. and the U.K. have written to Lyons on the matter, alleging it represents a clampdown on academic freedom.

The 47,000-member American Association of University Professors, which rates universities on their protection of academic freedom, said in a letter [3] Monday that the situation raises "serious issues."

More than 100 members of the University of San Diego's college of arts and sciences faculty asked Lyons to reinstate Beattie's appointment on Tuesday, and say they may consider [4] a vote of no confidence in her leadership.

Murray pointed to his own experience with Beattie, a former president of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain, calling her a "devout and personally committed Catholic."

Continuing, Murray writes:

> The association exists "to promote the study of theology and in particular of the doctrines and tenets of the Roman Catholic faith" through appropriate conversation, exchange, mutual challenge, and

scholarly analysis; always in pursuit of the further discerning and living of Catholic truth within the Church.

Professor Beattie's former role and continuing standing within the association by no means suggests any formal endorsement of all the positions she personally explores, nor general membership's agreement with her on some of these points.

Rather, it represents due recognition of her integrity, commitment, learning and distinction and, with that, recognition too that the way in which theology serves the Church and thereby the world is through robustly charitable conversation (cf. the classical role of *disputatio*), confident that the Spirit is leading the Church always into the total truth of God in Christ.

May the Lord guide us all as we seek to live this vitally challenging vocation in the university world and may our institutions show forth the health and wealth of Catholic conversation for the good of Church and world.

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Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/node/38406
[2] https://www.thetablet.co.uk/issue/1000335/letters-extra
[3] http://ncronline.org/node/38766
[4] http://ncronline.org/node/38986