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# Cardinal Newman Society takes on watchdog role for Catholic identity

Dan Morris-Young | Nov. 21, 2012

One Catholic university president calls the Cardinal Newman Society "a small group of fundamentalist ideologues." Another Catholic college president says the organization provides "a great service to the Catholic church in America."

The U.S. Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities indicates discomfort with the Cardinal Newman Society. The Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities charges that the group eschews dialogue and "chooses to criticize and make distorted claims against Catholic colleges, oftentimes maligning them in the process."

Meanwhile, Cardinal Raymond L. Burke, who heads the Vatican's Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura, is the "ecclesiastical advisor" to the society's Center for the Advancement of Catholic Higher Education. And some churchmen, such as retired Archbishop Elden Curtiss of Omaha, speak highly of the organization.

Based in Manassas, Va., the Cardinal Newman Society defines its mission as helping ?renew and strengthen Catholic identity in Catholic higher education? and pounding home adherence to Pope John Paul II's apostolic constitution on catholic colleges and universities, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae.*

It is probably best known for its role in controversies over speakers or course offerings, conflagrations it often helps ignite. Examples abound:

- In May, the society gathered 27,000 signatures on an online petition demanding that Jesuit-run Georgetown University disinvite U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, a Catholic, from a commencement address because of her department's requiring contraceptive coverage in employee health insurance programs as part of the Obama administration's health care reform. She spoke at the university.
- In March it encouraged an email campaign against a commencement address by Victoria Reggie Kennedy at Anna Maria College in Paxton, Mass. The widow of the late Sen. Edward Kennedy was accused of supporting abortion, same-sex marriage and contraception. Bishop Robert J. McManus of Worcester, Mass., agreed with the protest. The invitation was retracted.
- It strongly criticized St. Peter's College in New Jersey for honoring U.N. Undersecretary General Anwarul K. Chowdhury at its May commencement, because the Bangladeshi diplomat backs contraception initiatives and population control programs. Chowdhury spoke.
- It encouraged efforts to have retired Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu removed as Gonzaga University's May 13 commencement speaker. Detractors said the Nobel Prize winner supported abortion, has made offensive statements toward Jews, and advocates contraception and the ordination of gay clergy. Tutu appeared at the Spokane, Wash., university.

?We have argued that the selection as a commencement speaker provides both an honor and a platform -- one that allows for no genuine dialogue,? Cardinal Newman Society president/Ceo Patrick J. Reilly told NCR in an

e-mail. ?So, clearly that is the greatest concern, especially when paired with an honorary degree.?

?But, The question should also be asked by a college that sincerely cares for its students: Why is it necessary to invite a particular individual who clearly opposes the church, and not someone who could better contribute to a Catholic college?s mission of cultivating both the intellect and virtue?? Reilly added. ?It is often possible to study the writings of a controversial figure without inviting them to campus. This allows the dispassionate, serious reflection that is appropriate to a college or university.?

Reilly founded the Cardinal Newman Society in 1993.

The Cardinal Newman Society says its focus on Catholic campus speakers puts teeth into a 2004 statement by the U.S. bishops, ?Catholics in Political Life.? The document points of emphasis include: ?the Catholic community and Catholic institutions should not honor those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles. They should not be given awards, honors or platforms which would suggest support for their actions.?

The group's Campus Speaker Monitoring Project encourages website visitors to join in tracking Catholic higher education activities, and offers an email response form for reporting them to the society.

The society's website (**www.cardinalnewmansociety.org[1]**) provides ongoing reports in its "Campus Notes Blog." A recent entry notes the appearance of actress Rosario Dawson on the campus of St. John's University in New York. Calling Dawson "an advocate of same-sex 'marriage,' " the blog said the school "promoted Dawson's campus visit" for a "voter registration drive as part of her efforts with a pro-abortion rights group she co-founded, called 'Voto Latino.' "

According to the society, the number of Catholic colleges and universities that "hosted scandalous commencement speakers and honorees including supporters of abortion rights, stem-cell research, same-sex 'marriage' " has dropped from 24 in 2006 to 11 in the spring of 2010. It seems clear the Cardinal Newman Society is giving itself at least partial credit.

However, university presidents such as Sr. Andrea Lee at St. Catherine University in St. Paul-Minneapolis might wince at that.

"The Cardinal Newman Society is not a significant driver at all" in the selection of "St. Kate" speakers, said Lee, a member of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

A former board member of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, Lee said she sees "the wisdom in considering differently invitations to speakers who are part of the university's ongoing program of educational opportunities, both in and outside of the classroom, and invitations to speakers for public events where a speaker's presence might suggest university endorsement of their views."

"However -- and this is a big 'however' -- I also believe that consideration of a speaker's suitability as a speaker or honoree ought to consider the person's entire spectrum of contributions and merit. As a result, my list of 'unsuitable' speakers would, I suspect, be much shorter than that of the Cardinal Newman Society," she added.

Any run-ins with the society? "We have been scorched a few times," Lee replied, "most often for something that is discovered embedded many clicks down in our website. One example was a third-party software package linked from our health care package for student self-help. Somewhere in there among the hundreds of possible choices was a single link to Planned Parenthood."

"What has been most disturbing is the frequent practice of the Cardinal Newman Society to jump to the most

negative conclusion without taking time to inquire about context or the actual facts," Lee said. "Most colleagues I know do not take the Cardinal Newman Society seriously, nor do they count on them to be objective or thoughtful in their quickly-arrived-at conclusions. Most university leaders I know count on them to be predictably negative."

Thomas H. Powell, president of the nation's second-oldest Catholic university, Mount St. Mary's in Emmitsburg, Md., said he has urged Reilly to "pick up the phone and call" a school president.

"I was one of the early critics of the Cardinal Newman Society because I thought they were doing too much without incorporating Jesus' message of love," Powell said.

For example, Powell said, criticism of the August campus appearance of Maryland's Gov. Martin O'Malley was out of line. A Catholic, O'Malley supports same-sex marriage. The university publicly thanked O'Malley for his role in the procurement of a major wind farm project at Mount St. Mary's.

"We need to get some balance back," Powell said.

The society and Mount St. Mary's clearly do collaborate, however. In July, the society announced it was moving its Center for the Advancement of Catholic Higher Education to the Maryland campus, where it would be placed under direction of Msgr. Stuart Swetland. The priest also serves as the university's vice president for Catholic identity and mission, and holds the Archbishop Flynn Chair for Christian Ethics.

Powell applauds Cardinal Newman Society initiatives such as ?gathering together Catholic college presidents, faculty and other folks to discuss some of the critical issues? facing Catholic higher education.

According to data supplied to federal authorities and culled by the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, there are 262 Catholic "institutions of higher learning" in the U.S. The society's *The Newman Guide to Choosing a Catholic College* -- its "flagship ? program to promote and defend faithful Catholic education" -- rates schools based on its analysis of their "excellence and fidelity." It endorses 28 Catholic institutions.

Powell and other presidents whose schools are listed in the publication say it aids enrollment and fundraising.

"Being listed in *The Newman Guide* has been extremely helpful in student recruitment and in finding solid and generous benefactors," said Fr. Robert W. Cook, president of one of the smallest (124 students) and newest (in its sixth year) Catholic colleges in the country, Wyoming Catholic College in Lander.

"I greatly admire the Cardinal Newman Society and have had nothing but excellent experiences with them," Cook said.

Derry Connolly agrees. Many families choose John Paul the Great Catholic University (92 undergraduates and 53 graduate students) "because of the Cardinal Newman Society stamp of approval," said Connolly, the San Diego school's president. "I talk with families frequently who use it exclusively as their college selection guide."

His counterpart 12 miles to the south takes issue. University of San Diego president Mary E. Lyons said the society "trolls for evidence for what they consider to be inauthentically Catholic," "they rarely ask questions, make assumptions and use heavy-handed tactics," and "if you don't respond in the way they want you to, they pull a trigger on this barrage of people sending emails and making phone calls -- blast communications."

"The vileness and obscenity of the communication from some of those who consider themselves to be the

soldiers of righteousness is very telling to me," Lyons said.

"But at the same time I have to say I have experienced" pressure and derision from the extreme left, she said, "and zealots from either end of the spectrum are to be avoided if possible."

Reilly told NCR: it has been several years since we regularly organized letter and e-mail campaigns. the protests that colleges continue to receive are from the grassroots. We need do little more than report the scandals. ? Today we are focused on a professional journalistic operation that reports on Catholic higher education issues with the primary goal of informing Catholic families as well as the colleges and bishops.?

Reilly did not disclose the size of the society's email list, but said, "It's very large, and growing."

While the actual wallop carried by the society can be debated, its growth cannot. According to public tax records, the organization's annual revenues increased by more than 50 percent between 2006 and 2011, from just over $1 million to nearly $1.6 million. Its president and executive vice president command six-figure salaries.

Last summer Reilly announced the hiring of two additional ?senior level program staff.?

Cardinal Newman Society income derives from "thousands of very generous and loyal donors, including the laity, priests and bishops," Reilly told *NCR*. "Some of our individual donors make gifts through family foundations and businesses."

While the organization frequently makes reference to its "members," there are no members per se, no dues, nor an enrollment process. The society's supporters may donate online and have their names included on the organization's email list. "The vast majority are not donors," Reilly said.

Lyons has experienced the tsunami of society supporters' "blast communications."

"I have been dealing with those people off and on for about 16 years now in two different states at two different schools," said Lyons, who is immediate past chair of the Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities.

"I have been both the devil and the darling of the Cardinal Newman Society," she said. She recalled crossing swords with the society over a classroom offering at the College of St. Benedict in St. Joseph, Minn., where she was president prior to moving to San Diego in 2003.

However, the society lauded her, she said, after turning down a potential temporary appointment to an endowed chair for a person to whom the society objected. The decision was based on criteria specified by the donor, not the society's objections, Lyons said. However, "they picked this up and made it sound like I was taking some kind of stand on authentic Catholic teaching."

In neither case was she contacted by the organization for details or clarification, she said.

"Over the years I have seen a number of college presidents spooked" by the society, especially "when a bishop gets on board with their agenda," she said.

"To provide honors and a platform as an institution to someone we know maintains an agenda or thrust that is totally antithetical to our values would make us look stupid," Lyons said. "Why would we do that? We do not need the bishop or the Cardinal Newman Society to tell us that. On the other hand, people are complex and

multidimensional and to define a life or a career by a narrow band of issues can do a tremendous disservice."

Catholic college and university presidents, trustees, directors and others "do promote and nurture the Catholic character of our institutions" and do not need "self-appointed groups" to act as "arbiters of taste," she said.

A written statement provided to *NCR* by Michael Galligan-Stierle, president of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, says the association disagrees "with those Catholic groups that prefer to insert themselves into the often complex and generally productive conversation on Catholic identity."

Galligan-Stierle repeats that the relationship of a school president and local bishop is "the primary vehicle for affirming the university's good work as well as identifying areas to be strengthened."

The association represents 90 percent of U.S. Catholic colleges and universities and acts as the "collective voice of Catholic higher education in this country," Galligan-Stierle wrote.

Jesuit Fr. Stephen Privett, president of the University of San Francisco, said in an email to *NCR* that the association better represents Catholic higher education than the Newman Society. "The Cardinal Newman Society is a small group of fundamentalist ideologues with virtually no in-depth knowledge of the Catholic tradition. For them, 'tradition' is pretty much limited to the Councils of Trent and Vatican I."

Reilly counters, "It is precisely because the ACCU and many of its member college presidents too often dismiss the concerns of the Catholic faithful that the Cardinal Newman Society exists."

Privett countercharges: "Our university's student population is approximately 60 percent non-Catholic -- the Cardinal Newman Society would find this problematic -- and located in San Francisco, so we want to be Catholic in a way that invites conversation and welcomes goodwilled persons of all faiths and no faith. We leave the doors and windows wide open in hopes that people will walk in and let fresh air in. The Cardinal Newman Society stands in self-righteous judgment on those they disagree with. USF tries to enter into conversation with 'the other' so they may learn from us and we from them. We believe in a church that is both teacher and learner. *Ecclesia discens et docens* is the classical terminology."

Privett said he has been "the recipient of numerous email/phone campaigns in fruitless efforts orchestrated by the Cardinal Newman Society to block a campus speaker."

He cited the example of the university honoring Bishop Kevin Dowling of Rustenburg, South Africa.

"I received hundreds of protesting emails, all using pretty much the same wording. Bishop Dowling was and is in perfectly good standing with Rome, but not with the Cardinal Newman Society. This is a clear example of the Cardinal Newman Society being a church unto itself. The Cardinal Newman Society clearly prefers to harshly judge people, rather than make any effort to understand them."

A Redemptorist, Dowling has advocated the use of condoms to combat HIV transmission and has criticized the revised English translation of the liturgy.

A statement by the president of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities pulled no punches. Jesuit Father Gregory F. Lucey quoted Ex Corde Ecclesiae's call "to explore courageously the riches of Revelation and of nature so that the united endeavor of intelligence and faith will enable people to come to the full measure of their humanity."

He then added, "This exploration is not without tensions, but Jesuit institutions continuously engage in rich dialogue to further understanding and to ensure that many voices are heard.

"The Cardinal Newman Society chooses not to engage in such dialogue, but instead chooses to criticize and make distorted claims against Catholic colleges, oftentimes maligning them in the process. This hardly fulfills the mission of the Cardinal Newman Society, which is to 'renew and strengthen Catholic identity.' Neither the university nor the Church is well served by such irresponsible actions."

*Part Two next issue: Who speaks of the "authentically Catholic"?*

**Editor's Note:** This is a slightly longer version of the story that appeared in the Nov 23-Dec 6, 2012 [2] print issue.

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