

## Boehner episode can start the dialogue

Mario T. García | May. 16, 2011 NCR Today

I want to weigh in on the controversy of House Speaker John Boehner being invited by the Catholic University of America to be its commencement speaker this past weekend.

As some of you know, 81 Catholic academics send a letter to Boehner pointing out that while they did not oppose his speaking at Catholic University, they were disappointed that as a Catholic himself, Boehner seems to have no sensitivity to Catholic social doctrine that focuses on social justice for working people and the poor.

Catholic social doctrine is a major foundation for the Church as a whole and has been supported by all popes since Pope Leo XIII issued his historic encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 that set out the Church's teaching on social justice, especially in the industrializing societies.

The letter by these Catholic academics points out the contradiction of Catholic University hosting Boehner, who has one of the worst records on issues related to working people and the poor. This includes the recent Republican budget bill passed in the House of Representatives that would: substantially cut into such programs as maternal and child health grants, children's nutrition programs, food stamps; and scale back Medicaid and turn Medicare into a private program where the elderly would pay more for their own insurance.

How could Boehner as a Catholic support such cuts that are aimed at providing a social safety net to the poor, the unemployed, and the elderly? Does he perhaps not know about the Church's position on social justice?

The letter writers believe that perhaps he does not and as a result welcomes him to Catholic University where he either will learn about Catholic social doctrine or be given a refresher course on it. They write:

"It is good for Catholic universities to host and engage the thoughts of powerful public figures, even Catholics such as yourself who fail to recognize (whether out of a lack of awareness or dissent) important aspects of Catholic teaching. We write in the hope that this visit will reawaken your familiarity with the teachings of your Church on matters of faith and morals as they relate to governance.

"Mr. Speaker, your voting record is at variance from one of the Church's most ancient moral teachings. From the apostles to the present, the Magisterium of the Church has insisted that those in power are morally obliged to preference the needs of the poor. Your record in support of legislation to address the desperate needs of the poor is among the worst in Congress. This fundamental concern should have great urgency for Catholic policy makers. Yet even now, you work in opposition to it."

The Catholic academics, unlike those two years ago who protested the invitation by Notre Dame University to President Obama and called for the rescinding of the invitation because of the President's support for a woman's right to choose, did not call on Catholic University to rescind the invitation to Boehner. They were not part of [what columnist Tim Rutten of the \*Los Angeles Times\* calls](#) [1] an "inquisition."

What these academics are doing -- and I am in agreement with them and I wish I had been asked to sign the letter -- is asking that Catholic University use the occasion of Boehner's commencement visit to address the inconsistency of the Church's embrace of social justice and Boehner's callous disregard for social justice. They are not, unlike the Notre Dame protestors, attempting to silence Boehner but only calling on him as a Catholic to address his seemingly opposition to Catholic social doctrine.

If nothing else, this confrontation, if we even want to call it this, might start a new dialogue on the relevancy of Catholic social doctrine in an era where conservative Catholic lay leaders, such as Boehner, are now in power and seem to have little concern for the poor and oppressed. I would welcome such a dialogue and call on other Catholic academics on their campuses to organize such forums.

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