Culture



Jesuit Fr. James Martin (RNS/James Martin)



by Brian Roewe

NCR environment correspondent

View Author Profile

broewe@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @brianroewe

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The national seminary in the United States revoked an invitation to Jesuit Fr. James Martin to speak on campus after a campaign among far-right church groups flooded the school with opposition to the priest's new book on LGBT Catholics.

Martin, editor at large of America magazine and a consultor to the Vatican's Secretariat for Communication, was set to speak to alumni at Theological College at the Catholic University of America on Oct. 4. On Friday, he was notified that the presentation, which was scheduled more than a year in advance, would no longer take place.

In a statement, Theological College said that since the publication of Martin's latest book — *Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter Into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity* — it "has experienced increasing negative feedback from various social media sites regarding the seminary's invitation" to the popular Jesuit priest.

Related: Fr. James Martin in social media fray over LGBT conversation

In recent weeks, far-right church websites such as Church Militant, LifeSiteNews and the blog run by Fr. John Zuhlsdorf, aka "Fr. Z," have questioned the appropriateness of Martin speaking at seminary and other church events — referring to him repeatedly as a "homosexualist" and "sodomy-promoting" — and in some cases, urged their audiences to express their concerns directly to organizers. In a Sept. 13 post on Martin's scheduled Theological College appearance, Zuhlsdorf asked, "Does it seem right to you that a seminary should spotlight an open promoter of a homosexualist agenda?"

The Theological College decision was the latest in a series of recent disinvites for Martin, author of more than 20 books and whose notoriety skyrocketed during his time as "official chaplain" of comedian Stephen Colbert's "The Colbert Report." Other cancellations came from the Order of the Holy Sepulchre (set for Oct. 21 in New York City) and from Cafod, the official aid agency of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, which was scheduled for later that month in London.

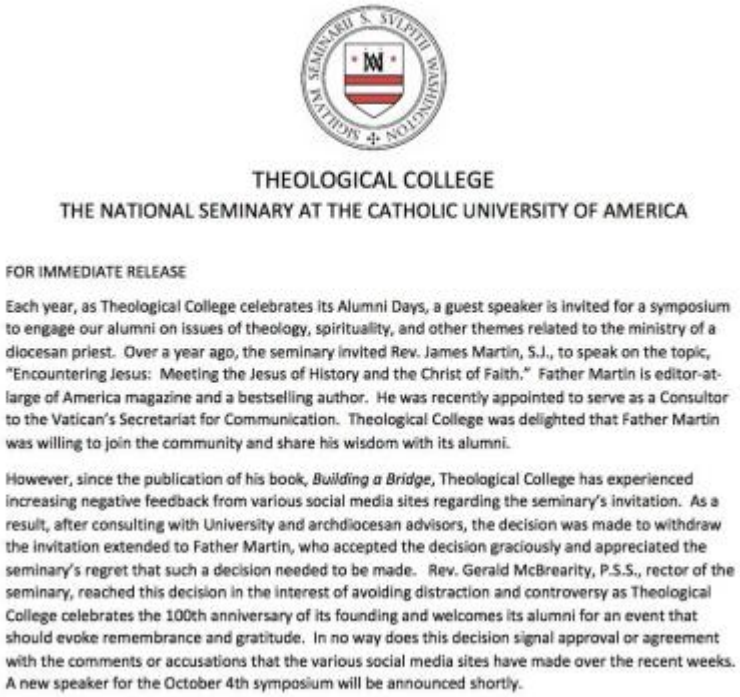
On his Facebook page, Martin said none of the talks were set to focus on LGBT Catholics but on the topic of "Encountering Jesus: Meeting the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith." In the case of Theological College, he was told that the campaign against his speaking brought "a storm of phone calls, emails and

messages to Theological College," and also had people screaming at receptionists handling the phones.

A statement from Theological College said the seminary's rector Fr. Gerald McBrearity decided to withdraw the invitation "in the interest of avoiding distraction and controversy." Martin's talk was set to take place during the seminary's centennial celebration.

The statement added, "In no way does this decision signal approval or agreement with the comments or accusations that the various social media sites have made over the recent weeks."

An earlier version of the statement said the decision to uninvite Martin came "after consulting with University and archdiocesan advisors." But a later version, and currently posted on Theological College's website, says the decision was reached "after considerable consultation with various constituencies."



THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE
THE NATIONAL SEMINARY AT THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Each year, as Theological College celebrates its Alumni Days, a guest speaker is invited for a symposium to engage our alumni on issues of theology, spirituality, and other themes related to the ministry of a diocesan priest. Over a year ago, the seminary invited Rev. James Martin, S.J., to speak on the topic, "Encountering Jesus: Meeting the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith." Father Martin is editor-at-large of America magazine and a bestselling author. He was recently appointed to serve as a Consultor to the Vatican's Secretariat for Communication. Theological College was delighted that Father Martin was willing to join the community and share his wisdom with its alumni.

However, since the publication of his book, *Building a Bridge*, Theological College has experienced increasing negative feedback from various social media sites regarding the seminary's invitation. As a result, after consulting with University and archdiocesan advisors, the decision was made to withdraw the invitation extended to Father Martin, who accepted the decision graciously and appreciated the seminary's regret that such a decision needed to be made. Rev. Gerald McBrearity, P.S.S., rector of the seminary, reached this decision in the interest of avoiding distraction and controversy as Theological College celebrates the 100th anniversary of its founding and welcomes its alumni for an event that should evoke remembrance and gratitude. In no way does this decision signal approval or agreement with the comments or accusations that the various social media sites have made over the recent weeks. A new speaker for the October 4th symposium will be announced shortly.

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In a separate statement issued Saturday morning, CUA, which hosted a talk by Martin last year, said the decision by the seminary was made independent of it and

“does not reflect the University’s policy on inviting speakers to campus, nor does it reflect the specific counsel received from the University and leadership.”

CUA President John Garvey likened the campaign to craft Martin as controversial to “the same pressure being applied by the left for universities to withdraw speaker invitations” — efforts that groups like Church Militant have frequently blasted.

Martin said on Facebook he held “no ill will” against Theological College or the others who cancelled his appearances, and that organizers “were all apologetic and in some cases more upset than I was.” He attributed the decisions to the “anger or fear” generated among fringe groups “that traffic in homophobia” and the outsize influence they can exert.

“This is disturbing and should be disturbing to all of us. It is not coming from God,” he wrote on Facebook.

A petition created by LifeSiteNews in late August has accumulated 5,000 signatures calling for Martin’s removal as a consultor to the Vatican Secretariat for Communication, to which he was appointed in April. The petition bases the request on what they called “Father Martin’s unabashed and continual affirmation of homosexuality.”

In a video calling attention to Martin’s scheduled appearance at the Order of the Holy Sepuchlre dinner, Michael Voris of Church Militant — which removed “Catholic” from its name in 2012 after pressure from the Detroit archdiocese — said that Martin’s inclusion at the gathering “calls into question the entire leadership of the order,” and questioned whether there were knights out there who were willing “to call an end to this embrace of evil. Father Martin works for the destruction of the authentic faith. He has no business at your event.”

Through *Building a Bridge*, Martin envisioned widening a dialogue within the Catholic Church about how it can better welcome and minister to its members who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender. Since its June publication, he has given roughly two dozen presentations, including at Fordham University, Villanova University and most recently at the University of Scranton.

The book has formal approval from Martin’s Jesuit provincial, along with five U.S. bishops: Newark N.J., Cardinal Joseph Tobin; Archbishop John Wester, who is a former chair of the communications committee of the U.S. bishops’ conference; San Diego

Bishop Robert McElroy; Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky; and Cardinal Kevin Farrell, prefect of the Vatican's Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life.

While Martin told NCR last week he's been pleased with the "overwhelmingly positive" reception to *Building a Bridge*, it has also been met with a small, though vociferous, backlash. Attacks against him have "really intensified," he said, with people using homosexual slurs and calling him a heretic.

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The campaign against Martin is the latest waged by groups like Church Militant, LifeSiteNews and the Lepanto Institute against church organizations and events they view as supportive of same-sex marriage and abortion. For years, they have targeted Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Charities and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development — all institutions of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops — on grounds that each organization either worked with secular groups that supported abortion, or where distributing or encouraging the distribution of birth control.

The bishops have repeatedly come to the defense of their own agencies, and condemned the groups, stating bluntly in a 2013 statement defending Catholic Relief Services "We want to make it clear that those making these public critiques, albeit, we hope, in good faith, do not speak for the Catholic Church."

Church Militant was singled out for its "shocking rhetoric" in a widely circulated July essay in La Civiltà Cattolica, the Italian Jesuit magazine that is reviewed by the Vatican before publication. The article examined what the authors — both seen as close to Pope Francis — described as a "surprising ecumenism" forming among fundamental evangelicals and some Catholic conservatives in the United States.

[Brian Roewe is an NCR staff writer. His email address is **broewe@ncronline.org**. Follow him on Twitter: @BrianRoewe.]

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