Culture

News



Sites like Church Militant, Life Site News and their followers on social media have called for Fr. James Martin's removal from speaking engagements and other roles. (NCR/Toni Ann Ortiz)



by Brian Roewe

NCR environment correspondent

View Author Profile

broewe@ncronline.org

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In the week since Theological College at the Catholic University of America disinvited Jesuit Fr. James Martin from an upcoming reunion event, alumni have voiced their anger and dismay with the decision to each other and the seminary.

The Washington-based seminary cancelled the scheduled event with the popular author and media personality in response to backlash from far-right Catholic groups to Martin's book on LGBT Catholics. In addition to disappointing some alumni, the move also made unlikely allies among two U.S. bishops, who in separate essays condemned the personal attacks against Martin that fueled his cancellation as harmful to the broader Catholic Church.

"Very unhappy about the decision," said Fr. Martin Peter, a retired priest in the Indianapolis Archdiocese and the alumni representative for the seminary's 1967 graduating class. Martin had been scheduled to talk during the seminary's annual Alumni Days celebration (Oct. 3-4), which this year marks the 100th year since Theological College's founding.



Jesuit Fr. James Martin (RNS/Courtesy of James Martin)

The seminary, part of the Catholic University of America, which was founded by the U.S. bishops in 1887 and carries a papal charter, said in a statement sent to alumni Sept. 15 it made the decision in an attempt to avoid distraction and controversy during the centennial anniversary, after it "experienced increasing negative feedback from various social media sites."

Run by the Society of St. Sulpice, the seminary declined further comment on the anti-Martin campaign beyond the original press release. It told NCR there would be not be a public speaking event at this year's alumni gathering.

In recent weeks, far-right Catholic groups including Church Militant and LifeSiteNews waged a social media campaign against Martin over his book *Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter Into a Relationship of*

Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity. The campaigns targeted organizations hosting Martin as a speaker and expanded to harassing phone calls in an effort to have Martin's appearances cancelled.

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Martin, editor-at-large of America magazine and a consultor of the Vatican's Secretariat for Communication, also had an appearance at the Oct. 21 Order of the Holy Sepulchre dinner cancelled because of the campaign. A lecture hosted by Cafod, the official aid agency of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, also was cancelled, according to Martin due to concerns about negative publicity tied to *Building a Bridge*; Cafod has said the event was postponed and their invite to Martin stands.

"Navigating through this backlash hasn't been easy. But I am at peace with the book and with the mission to love and advocate for LGBT Catholics," Martin wrote in a perspective Sept. 21 for the Washington Post, referring to the groups targeting him as "a kind of Catholic alt-right."

Alumni disappointed

Peter said that he and about a dozen classmates began planning a year ago to attend Alumni Days, a small affair that typically draws around 30-50 alumni, to celebrate together their golden anniversary as priests. Some planned to attend specifically because of Martin, Peter added. He was among those excited that the talk was to center on Martin's 2014 book *Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, which he read with his parish book club in Columbus, Indiana.

President of his class during his four years at Theological College, Peter said he disagreed with its decision because the university succumbed to those seeking to silence Martin.

"I don't think we should allow ourselves to be blackmailed and pressured by groups … If we respond and cancel things like this, it just emboldens them to continue to oppose the whole spirit that I see in Pope Francis, who tells us to be reaching out to the margins, and telling us to be nonjudgmental and to be open," he said.

Related: Fr. James Martin uninvited from talk at CUA seminary

Other alumni echoed those sentiments in emails sent to Theological College, copies of some which were shared with NCR. They expressed disappointment and shock with the decision, with one priest calling the invitation withdrawal a "grave error," and another lay graduate labeling it "a shameful and cowardly act."

"This was an opportunity to be courageous and allow dialogue to happen. Sad to think my alma mater is caving in to pressure and perhaps financial concerns instead of the right to hear all sides — even, if not especially, on controversial topics," wrote one priest.

Several said they would no longer attend the alumni gathering, while others said the "unvitation" has led them to read *Building a Bridge*. A few pointed out that Martin wasn't expected to talk about ministering to LGBT Catholics but instead on "Encountering Jesus: Meeting the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith." (Martin gave a talk on that same theme Sept. 19 to a gathering of 2,500 of principals and teachers of the New York Archdiocese.)

"I guess the opportunity to 'Encounter Jesus' is in abeyance at Theological College," Fr. John Cahill, a 1973 alumnus and a priest in the Covington, Kentucky, diocese, wrote in one email.

Veiled attacks on Pope Francis' campaign

With *Building a Bridge*, Martin sought to construct a dialogue around the Catholic Church's ministry to Catholic who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender. The book, which has sold 25,000 copies in the U.S. since its June publication — with sales experiencing a spike this week after Theological College's disinvite drew national press coverage, according to its publisher HarperOne — received formal ecclesial approval from Martin's Jesuit superiors, and was endorsed by four U.S. bishops, among them two cardinals.

> "You can't let people stop you when you're doing what's right"
> —Fr. John Cahill
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Since the cancellation, the Jesuits and the Paulist Fathers have issued public statements of support of Martin and his book, as has LGBT Catholic advocacy group News Ways Ministry.

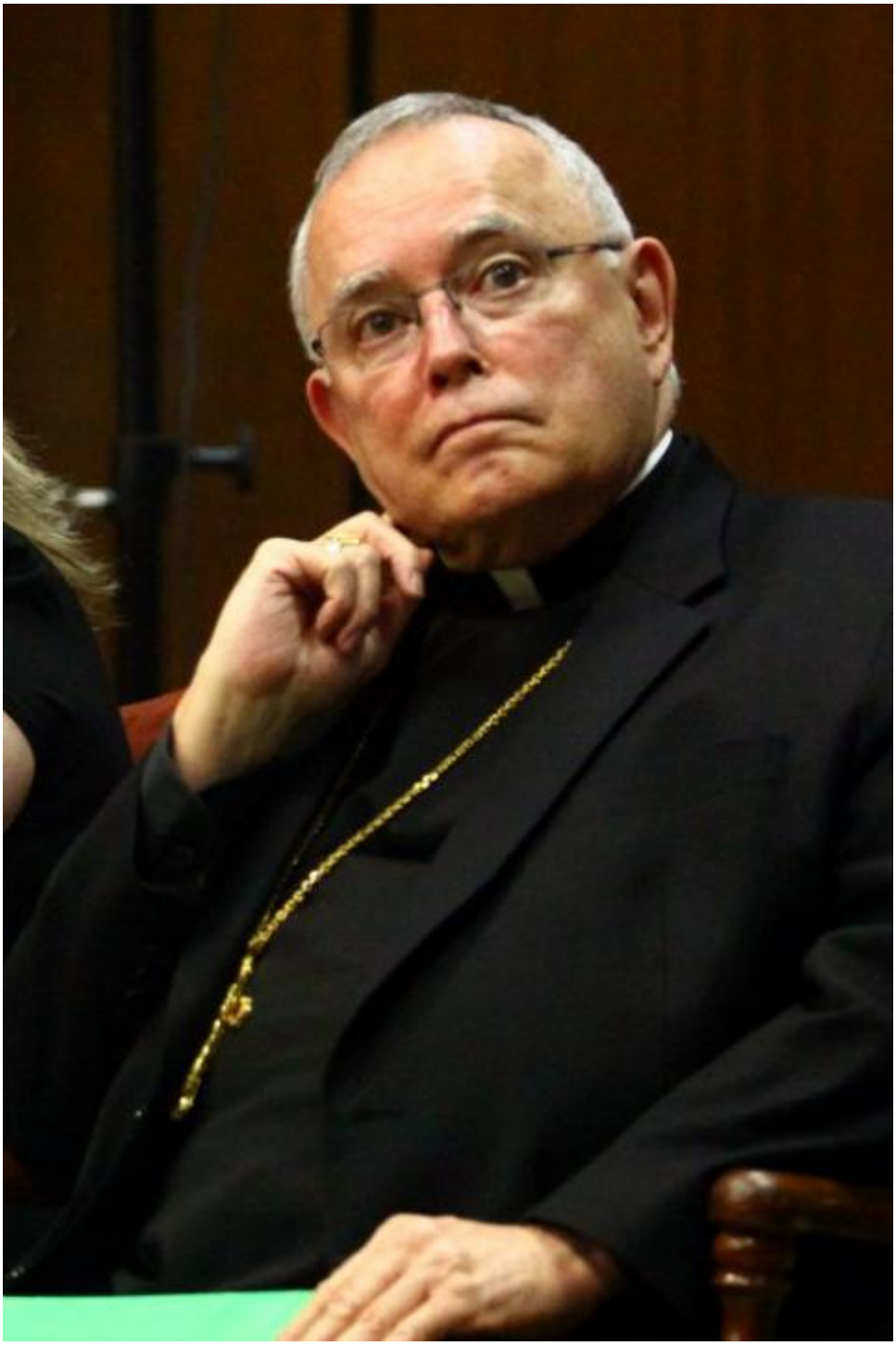
Writing in America magazine Sept. 18, San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy reinforced his endorsement of the book and addressed what he called the campaign "to vilify Father Martin, to distort his work, to label him heterodox, to assassinate his personal character and to annihilate both the ideas and the dialogue that he has initiated."

He said organizations that canceled Martin's speaking appearances "have bought peace, but in doing so they have acceded to and reinforced a tactic and objectives that are deeply injurious to Catholic culture in the United States and to the church's pastoral care for members of the L.G.B.T. communities."

"This campaign of distortion must be challenged and exposed for what it is — not primarily for Father Martin's sake but because this cancer of vilification is seeping into the institutional life of the church," McElroy wrote, highlighting three drivers behind the attacks: "homophobia, a distortion of fundamental Catholic moral theology and a veiled attack on Pope Francis and his campaign against judgmentalism in the church."

"The coordinated attack on *Building a Bridge* must be a wake-up call for the Catholic community to look inward and purge itself of bigotry against the L.G.B.T. community," the bishop said.

In an essay Sept. 21 for the conservative Catholic journal First Things, Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput joined in condemning the "inexcusable ugly" personal attacks against Martin, separating "legitimate, serious criticism" of *Building a Bridge* from what he called "*ad hominem* trashing."



Bishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia is pictured at an Oct. 3, 2016, news conference. (CNS/CatholicPhilly.com/Sarah Webb)

"The bitterness directed at the person of Fr. Martin is not just unwarranted and unjust; it's a destructive counter-witness to the Gospel," Chaput said. He called Martin "a man of intellect and skill whose work I often admire."

The archbishop argued that it was false to pin church divisions solely on right-wing Catholics, saying progressive Catholics have played their own role. But the archbishop has spoken out in the past specifically against groups like Church Militant and the Lepanto Institute. After the two labeled as pro-abortion organizers of the 2015 World Meeting of Families, held in Philadelphia, Chaput told a journalist, "Both Lepanto and ChurchMilitant sow division wherever they tread. ... They are sincere, but also destructive."

In a Sept. 18 op-ed for La Croix International, Massimo Faggioli, a church historian at Villanova University, said the campaigns against Martin "should worry all Catholics." He said the groups behind them "make up a Catholic cyber-militia" that, though small, have grown in recent years and shown an ability to wield power and influence in the U.S. church.

"Even as Pope Francis has tried to stress the prime virtue of mercy, certain Catholics have ramped up the use of the language of hatred and new channels of intimidation. This is the story of an institutional Catholic Church that is trying to change and the virulent reaction against it," Faggioli said.

Difference of opinion, age

Jerry Filteau, a retired Catholic journalist and 1971 Theological College graduate ('67 graduate of its Basselin program), said the situation regarding Martin reminded him of the 1976 "Call to Action" conference, held in Detroit, where a member of the "Sons of Thunder" screamed "Judas!

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

Judas! Judas!" at Detroit Cardinal John Dearden in protest of the discussions on the future of the U.S. church's social action. "You could see the hatred in their faces," Filteau recalled.

A former reporter for Catholic News Service and National Catholic Reporter, Filteau said he was "very disappointed that Theological College would cave into those kinds of forces in the church. When you let the shouters win, it doesn't help the church any."

Other alumni experienced déjà vu to 1963, when Jesuit Frs. John Courtney Murray and Gustave Weigel, along with Swiss theologian Fr. Hans Küng and the Benedictine

liturgist Fr. Godfrey Diekmann, were barred from speaking at Catholic University of America, and relocated their lectures to Georgetown University.

Cahill, who served multiple stints in student leadership at Theological College, told NCR he was "dismayed" by his former classmate rector Sulpician Gerald McBrearity's decision. Not standing up to the groups harassing the seminary sets a bad example for current seminarians, he said.

"I don't question his sincerity and all of that kind of stuff, or his character. I question his judgment. I think it's real important that we push back on people who are trying to bully the church," Cahill said.

He added that after seminarians are ordained, "they going to be facing the same kind of pressures if they preach the Gospel. … You can't let people stop you when you're doing what's right."

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> —Bishop Robert McElroy

While many of the emails from angry alumni came from graduates of Theological College during the 1960s and '70s, younger priests have largely remained silent, from what Cahill and others have heard. Requests for comment sent by NCR to nine Theological College class representatives who graduated between 1997 and 2017 were not returned.

Fr. John Wagner, a 1987 graduate of Theological College, told NCR that he "was a little bit disappointed" by the decision but supported it and understood why it was made. He said he liked Martin and listens when he comes on Catholic radio, but "given the last book that he wrote, I can see where that would cause controversy." Sponsoring a talk by Martin, he said, could cast a negative impression on the college by implying it supports what Martin wrote in *Building a Bridge*.

"Even though he may not be talking about LGBT issues [at the alumni event], because of what he said, it's kind of implicating it. So it's guilt by association," said Wagner, pastor of Church of the Redeemer in Mechnicsville, Virginia.

As of Sept. 21, a petition begun by Faithful America had collected more than 22,000 signatures seeking Martin's invite reinstated. Some alumni wondered why Catholic University, which hosted a talk by Martin last year and distanced itself from the seminary's decision, wouldn't volunteer its campus for the talk. Martin is scheduled to speak Sept. 30 at Holy Trinity Church, in Washington, which extended the invite after the seminary canceled.

Even absent a physical appearance at Theological College by Martin, past graduates were certain he would have a prominent presence at the alumni event given the controversy around his withdrawn invitation.

"I'm sure there will be a lot of discussion about this at the reunion," Peter said.

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

Read this next: Can Fr. James Martin's bridge hold up?

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