News



Abby Johnson speaks during the Republican National Convention broadcast from Washington Aug. 25, 2020. (CNS/Republican National Convention, Handout via Reuters)

by Madeleine Davison

View Author Profile
mdavison@ncronline.org

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Students at the Catholic University of America have released a series of letters and petitions protesting the school's decision to allow Abby Johnson, a prominent pro-life activist known for her public racism and support of Donald Trump, to speak in a Feb. 9 Zoom lecture hosted by a student club.

Johnson is slated to speak during an event hosted by the Washington, D.C., school's Cardinals for Life student group. She is a former Planned Parenthood clinic director, who now works as CEO of And Then There Were None ministries, which encourages people to leave their jobs in clinics that provide abortions.

During her time as an activist, Johnson has gained a reputation for her racism and homophobia.

The university's Black Student Alliance released a statement Feb. 6 calling on university administrators to remove Johnson from the event, citing her racist and anti-LGBTQ statements. Johnson "actively rejects the consistent life ethic," and is not pro-life, but rather simply anti-abortion, the statement said.

"Through her blatant racism, sexism and homophobia, Abby Johnson continues to contribute to insensitive rhetoric, amplifying hate speech disguised as Catholic teachings," the statement said. "Religion should never be used as a shield to defend racism and other negative attitudes."

A second statement opposing the talk came from an alumni-run social media group, BlackatCatholicU.

According to reporting from the Daily Caller, the campus prolife group cancelled the event on Feb. 8, allegedly under pressure that also led to the resignation of the group’s student leader. But Johnson’s speech will continue with sponsorship by the CUA College Republicans.

“The event will take place as planned,” CUA President John Garvey told the Daily Caller. “An event for students who oppose Ms. Johnson’s presentation will be held at the same time.”

In an August 2020 video she uploaded to YouTube, Johnson, who is white, said police would be "smart" to racially profile her adopted biracial son because, "statistically, my brown son is more likely to commit a violent offense over my white sons."

In the video, Johnson also repeated racist stereotypes about Black fathers' parenting and sexual habits.

Johnson, who spoke at the 2020 Republican National Convention, is also a vocal Trump supporter who has participated in Jericho March protests against the 2020 election results. She also participated in the pro-Trump rally that led to the storming of the Capitol Jan. 6, according to a now-deleted post on her Facebook page, which was screenshot by the Jezebel website.

The activist has retweeted denials of the COVID-19 pandemic and celebrated flouting social distancing guidelines, while spreading falsehoods about the vaccines. In one video statement, Johnson, who is not a medical professional, attacked the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops for encouraging the use of certain COVID-19 vaccines; she said incorrectly that the vaccines bishops had approved were produced using tissue from aborted fetuses.

Johnson's Twitter is also filled with anti-LGBTQ rhetoric, including a Sept. 30, 2020, tweet where she remarked, "Maybe don't talk about Jesus while waving your gay flag" and a Feb. 5 post where she commented with vomit emojis on a picture of a group of people, some of whom appear to be transgender.

Johnson gained a wider audience after she became the subject of the 2019 film "Unplanned," which depicts her version of the events that led her to leave Planned Parenthood — a story whose details have been challenged by an investigation by the Texas Monthly.

In 2012 — the first time Johnson was invited to speak at Catholic University — the school's student government voted 17-2 to block the administration from funding her lecture, according to a 2012 student statement provided to NCR. The administration, alumni wrote, ignored the outcry against her and funded the talk anyway.

The 2012 statement said the university was not giving equitable weight or funding to student groups addressing social justice issues beyond abortion. The statement called on the administration to commit to a "consistent life ethic."

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"The longstanding primacy given to anti-abortion efforts by the University detracts from the credibility of student organizations rooted in social justice efforts, such as environmental justice, peace advocacy, and human rights," students said in the 2012 statement. "In addition, organizing around other social justice causes, such as opposition to the death penalty and torture and advocacy for prison, healthcare, and education reform has been curbed by the exclusive focus on anti-abortion activism."

Black at CatholicU, an alumni-run social media account dedicated to sharing experiences of racism on campus, said in an Instagram post that in funding Johnson's speech, the university administration had shown that despite recent diversity and inclusion statements, it was more committed to protecting bigotry than ensuring the safety of marginalized students.

"Something is clearly still alarmingly flawed deep within our alma mater," the post said. "It truly just goes to show that all the 'work' the various University departments have committed to do — as shown [throughout] our page — is actually meaningless."

Catholic University is 64.3% non-Hispanic white, 13.8% Hispanic or Latino, 4.5% Black and about 4.1% Asian, according to College Factual.

In an online statement on Johnson's speech, Conventual Franciscan Fr. Jude DeAngelo, the university chaplain, said both students of color and the Cardinals for Life club "deserve better" from him as university chaplain and that Johnson's talk had initially been planned two years in advance.

He said Cardinals for Life had spent months discerning before deciding to host Johnson for a talk despite "what many of us saw as her endorsement of racial profiling by police and her comments denegrating [sic] the black community" in the aftermath of the police killing of George Floyd.

In the statement, DeAngelo added that he felt he had failed the club by not arranging for them to communicate with students of color who opposed Johnson. He said he acknowledges many students will still feel "betrayed" by the decision to host Johnson and asked all opposed to her to pray for him.

"Cardinals for Life have insisted to Abby's team that she has been invited to this campus to tell her conversion story and not to convince others of her views on race

or her most recent views on the [U.S. bishops' conference]," DeAngelo said. "The Cardinals for Life do not endorse those positions."

Johnson herself has responded to the outcry, calling her detractors "cafeteria 'Catholics' " and denigrating Black Lives Matter and LGBTQ rights.

"I am waiting for the final answer as to whether I will be speaking or not. If they cancel, then I will open up my own event for their students," she wrote on Facebook. "I will not be silenced. The 'tolerant' left, right?"

A student petition asking the university to cancel Johnson's lecture has garnered more than 2,000 signatures as of the afternoon of Feb. 8. The university has roughly 5,400 graduate and undergraduate students.

"In creating this petition, we are asking that Cardinals for Life cancels the event in which Abby Johnson will speak via Zoom regarding her perspective on the pro-life issue," the petition says. "We ask that they explicitly acknowledge that Abby's views are not in line with Church teachings which promote the dignity of all human life, no matter sex, gender, race, or sexual orientation, from conception to natural death."

Other prominent Catholics have joined in the calls to oppose Johnson's speech, including Jeannie Gaffigan, writer and executive producer for "The Gaffigan Show" (loosely based on her life with husband Jim Gaffigan).

Jeannie Gaffigan urged her Twitter followers to sign a petition against Johnson, writing, "This is not cancel culture. This is a Catholic university & a mischaracterization of pro life is dangerous to life."

Angela Rasmussen, a Bible scholar and doctoral graduate of Catholic University who teaches at Georgetown University, argued against Johnson's lecture on the grounds that her apparent participation in pro-Trump riots violated the university's stated policy against advocacy of "the violent overthrow of the government of the United States or any political subdivision thereof."

In their statement, Black at CatholicU members said the university's decision to host Johnson again, despite student concerns, shows that student voices do not matter to the administration.

"The University administration continues to prioritize anti-abortion activism at the expense of students' wellbeing and in contradiction to Pope Francis' exhortation that

'equally sacred' are the lives of many other marginalized communities," alumni said in the statement. "Abby Johnson's racism, homophobic, and conspiratorial views should not be tolerated by a community which proclaims a Catholic, pro-life identity."

Editor's note: This story was updated to include news of the event's changed sponsorship.