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Catholic academic ayatollah shows true colors

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Four years ago I put a theoretical question to Patrick Reilly, president of the Virginia-based Cardinal Newman Society and self-appointed ayatollah to Catholic academia in this country. Reilly is back in the news today because President Obama will deliver the commencement address at the University of Notre Dame in May. The overseer of false orthodoxy doesn?t like that one bit.

?It is an *outrage* and a *scandal* (emphasis in the original) that ?Our Lady?s University,? one of the premier Catholic universities in the United States, would bestow such an honor on President Obama given his clear support for policies and laws that directly contradict fundamental Catholic teachings on life and marriage,? according to a **letter** [1] to Holy Cross Fr. John Jenkins, president of Notre Dame, from Reilly and thousands of petitioners he?s drummed up online.

Founded in 1993 by the Fordham-educated Reilly, the Society claims it is dedicated to strengthening Catholic identity at America?s Catholic colleges and universities. In reality, as Cardinal Newman rolls over in his recently relocated grave, Reilly uses the cardinal?s good name to promote the idea of university as Catholic madrassa.

My question to Reilly: How would he respond if then-president George W. Bush was invited to give a Catholic college commencement address? (Bush did not speak at a Catholic school that year.)

It was a trick question, designed, at some later date, to illustrate the truth about the Society?s McCarthyite tactics and fundamentalist agenda. The question had a context. Reilly is frequently ?scandalized? and appears to live in a constant state of ?outrage.?

In May 2005, for example, Reilly **was outraged** [2]not only at the pro-choice speakers invited to address new Catholic graduates at campuses across the country, but also that Sr. Helen Prejean, the anti-death penalty activist, was delivering the commencement address at Belmont, California?s Notre Dame de Namur University. Prejean, you see, is a capital punishment abolitionist, while the church leaves some wiggle room for ?cases of absolute necessity,? which, in Reilly?s view, makes her a dangerous dissenter. And though Prejean opposes abortion, she has publicly expressed sympathy for poor women in crisis pregnancies ? questioning whether our society really gives them a legitimate ?choice? ? which apparently is a big no-no for the keeper of conformity.

Reilly and the Society, however, were strangely silent when then-Vice President Cheney spoke at the Catholic University of America in January 2005. Cheney (like Obama) opposes a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage and has some questionable views on the ?intrinsic evil? of state-sponsored torture, but that was

apparently of no concern to Reilly. The Society did not protest the vice president?s appearance.

Here?s what is really going on. Ayatollah Reilly searches for hot button issues on Catholic campuses -- anything that has to do with gays gets them excited, as do performances of ?The Vagina Monologues? and, of course, pro-choice speakers (few of whom actually even discuss abortion in their presentations) ? that will energize their base of donors and activists. Then they highlight these offenses on the Web and through direct mail to generate revenue.

It is good work if you can get it: for his efforts Reilly (according to a 2007 financial disclosure report) drew a nearly six-figure salary.

Meanwhile, Catholic college presidents feel the heat generated by the witch hunts. They are required to go explain the basics of academic freedom to their local bishop, and risk alienating conservative alumni (i.e. their donors) when Reilly vents ?outrage? over the ?scandal of the day? he has uncovered.

All this, says the Society, is done in the name of preserving the ?Catholic identity? ? which in Reilly?s view seems threatened anytime any liberal or any Democrat disagrees, however mildly, with church teaching on abortion and gays. Better to silence the critics, mischaracterize their views, and place fear in the hearts of academic administrators then actually engage someone with an opposing view.

Meanwhile, for the head of an organization whose mission includes ?urging fidelity to the church?s magisterium,? Reilly is keeping some strange company. He serves on the **advisory board** [3]of another extremist group ? ?Catholic Citizens of Illinois? ? which is currently **publicizing** [4] an effort by whacky anti-abortion advocate Randall Terry to replace Washington Archbishop Donald Wuerl and get Arlington Bishop Paul Loverde replaced. Terry was in Rome recently making the case to Vatican officials that Wuerl and Loverde are insufficiently zealous because they refuse to deny Communion to pro-choice politicians in their dioceses.

With fidelity like that, maybe magisterial members Wuerl and Loverde would prefer some respectful dissent. Perhaps Loverde, whose diocese is home to the Newman Society, should have Reilly in for a visit.

Back to my trick question.

In 2005 I pointed out to Reilly that should Bush be invited to speak at a Catholic campus, the Society would be compelled to outrage. ?Bush, you see, supports embryonic stem cell research, though his policies limit it to existing stem cell lines,? I wrote. ?That?s a position directly counter to church teaching.

?Similarly, despite his anti-abortion record, the president supports exceptions for abortion in cases of rape, incest or where the life of the mother is threatened. That alone should be enough to draw the wrath of the Virginia-based group ... ??

Responded Reilly: ?Certainly if his position is opposed to the church on those issues (stem cell research and abortion exceptions),? he would be treated ?just like anyone else.?

That, I concluded, was ?more than a little hard to believe.?

Two years later, Bush was invited by his old friend and former adviser Jim Towey, president of St. Vincent College in Pennsylvania, to give the commencement address at the small Catholic school.

Not a peep from Reilly ? a silence that says more about Reilly and company than all the ?outrages? and ?scandals? he manufactures and exploits.

Feuerherd is NCR publisher and editor-in-chief.

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