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Jesuit educators back Obama Notre Dame invitation

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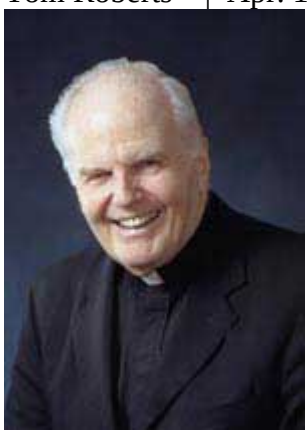

Jesuit Father Charles Currie

The president of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities said he has privately expressed support for the University of Notre Dame in its decision to invite President Barack Obama as commencement speaker and hopes the controversy that has erupted over the invitation leads to substantive talks among college presidents and bishops.

?I think that the bishops have the responsibility to protect the faith of their folks, and so I think this is the kind of thing that really has to be talked out in a conversation between bishops and university presidents. We have to raise the level of the dialogue beyond condemnations,? said Jesuit Fr. Charles Currie in an April 13 phone interview.

He said he and the presidents of the association?s 28 member institutions have privately expressed support to Holy Cross Fr. John Jenkins, president of Notre Dame, who recently has come under attack from right to life groups and some bishops who perceive the invitation as an endorsement of Obama?s pro-choice views on abortion and his support of stem cell research.

He also said he and other association members ?have been talking to individual bishops to see if we can?t lower the volume and lessen the heat of the discussion.?

In a related development, a leading critic among the bishops, Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, took two opportunities in recent days to qualify and expand on comments that were widely perceived as condemning the decision by Notre Dame.

In remarks that first appeared on an anti-abortion Web site, LifeSiteNews.com March 31, George said, ?It is clear that Notre Dame didn?t understand what it means to be Catholic when they issued this invitation and didn?t anticipate the kind of uproar that would be consequent to the decision, at least not to the extent that hit has happened.?

He further explained ?what it means to be Catholic? as ?when you?re Catholic, everything you do changes the

life of everybody else who calls himself a personal Catholic ? it?s a network of relationships.?

The line that received wide circulation was limited to the charge that Notre Dame ?didn?t understand what it means to be Catholic.?

During a presentation at DePaul University in Chicago April 6, George took the opportunity before speaking on the scheduled topic to explain that his widely quoted remarks were made in a context that was not a press conference and that he did not realize would be reported.

He said someone asked him what he was going to do about the Notre Dame situation and he responded: ?Well what are you doing. The bishops don?t control the University of Notre Dame, and if it?s doing something that you don?t like, it?s not enough to put the responsibility on the bishops to say something to it.

Take your own responsibilities in hand and you write to them rather than to us because our emails and post-it boxes are clogged with thousands and thousands of complaints about something that really isn?t directly under our responsibility at all. I think that it?s important that if someone in the Catholic communion doesn?t appreciate something that someone else does, that the contact be direct, that people take their own responsibilities in hand and address them in that way.?

A related point, he said, and one over which he had been in private communication with Jenkins, was that no Catholic institution acts in isolation. ?In Catholic community, whatever anyone does affects everybody else. We can think of scandals, we can think of problems and therefore no decision can be totally unilateral by any institution that calls itself Catholic. Everyone is going to feel involved, either reinforced or betrayed in some fashion.?

In that presentation and during an April 7 interview on Chicago television station WTTW, George several times expressed his respect for Obama, said ?he must succeed for us all? and said he was ?proud of him because we?re both from Chicago.?

When asked about his remark regarding the university?s not understanding what it means to be Catholic, George responded, ?Well, it?s not understanding what?s going to happen when you do something like that.? He said the Obama administration ?if not himself personally, is now identified with what seems to us to be a movement toward consolidating the right to kill unborn children in the law in such a way that it will be unassailable and can?t be qualified in any way.?

Asked about Jenkins? response that the invitation did not connote approval of Obama?s positions on abortion and stem cell research, George said, ?I think it is truly an authentic response from Fr. Jenkins, who is acting in good faith, as is the president himself. But I think it is not realistic when you?ve got this issue ? more than any other it is a society-dividing issue ? and there?s going to be this kind of reaction.?

George emphasized that he never said, as was reported in some outlets, that the president should be disinvited. ?It would be disrespectful,? he said. ?However, I think the university will probably have to try to enter into conversations about how they understand their own responsibilities as a Catholic university.?

That is a conversation that Currie would like to see among Catholic university presidents and the nation?s bishops. He said a tension currently exists between Ex Corde Ecclesiae, an apostolic constitution regarding the nature of Catholic higher education, and a U.S. bishops? statement on political life.

He said *Ex Corde* ?challenges colleges and universities to engage in dialogue with the culture? while the statement on political life ?seems to put some restrictions on that,? especially regarding conferring honors on those whose political views are in defiance of church teachings. Some have questioned, in the current

circumstance, whether someone like Obama, who is not Catholic, can be defiant of Catholic teaching.

Currie described the statement on political life as ?a provisional statement.? He said the bishops intended to revisit the issue, but that budget cuts resulted in the dissolution of the committee that was working on revisions. He would like to see the document revisited because ?multiple dimensions? of the problem ?have not been explored.?

Trust, good communication and ongoing dialogue are among the ?key ideas? contained in Ex Corde in describing the desired relationship between bishops and college presidents, Currie said. ?Universities recognize the responsibility of bishops,? he said, ?and bishops are encouraged by Ex Corde to recognize the complexity of universities.?

Roberts is NCR Editor at Large.

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