

Ave Maria U uses Notre Dame flap for financial gain

Tom Roberts | Apr. 23, 2009



Oratory at center of the town of Ave Maria.

Amid the uproar that has followed the University of Notre Dame's invitation to President Barack Obama, mostly from conservative quarters in the church, opportunities even beyond point scoring have emerged.

Ave Maria University in Ave Maria, Florida, for example, saw a possibility for financial gain. The university, founded in 2003 and pledging its fidelity to "magisterial teachings," sent out a mailing attempting to lure Notre Dame alumni to send in contributions and make it their "new alma mater."

Citing a U.S. bishops' 2004 statement, "Catholics in Political Life," the Ave Maria development office's letter, while not specifically using the Notre Dame name, announces that a "A prominent pro-abortion U.S. politician will be honored by a Catholic University soon."

The letter states that the invitation to Obama is a "contradiction" of the document on Catholics in political life. It reads: "Urgent! This Scandal Must be Stopped!" It then goes on to suggest a Ave Maria University donation.

"To protest the honoring of the Pro Abortion Politicians at Catholic Universities and to help AMU lead the next U.S. generation to the teachings of the church, enclosed is my gift of \$25 or \$___?"

Ave Maria was founded in 2003 by former Domino Pizza magnate Thomas Monahan, a high-profile traditional Catholic who has poured millions into conservative Catholic causes and now serves as chancellor of the university that is located in a newly developed town of Ave Maria, near Naples, Fla.

Dr. Richard Yanikoski, president of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, said he "took a dim view" of the mailing. "Ave Maria is stooping to an unfortunate level to try to raise \$25 contributions on the back of another institution's controversy," he said in an April 17 interview with NCR.

In an earlier interview with the Naples Daily News he termed the letter "crude."

Ave Maria is not a member of the Association and has not yet received the approval necessary from the local bishop to call itself a Catholic college. On its website, it states the university was founded "on Catholic principles" and exists to advance those principles.

The letter's reference to the bishops' document, Catholics in Political Life, raises a central question about the public complaints brought against Notre Dame by several bishops: How can a university be held to standards outlined in a document aimed at Catholics when the politician is of another denomination or faith?

Yanikoski, who said his association has taken no position on the controversy at Notre Dame, said that in informal communications with presidents of Catholic institutions he finds many of them "sympathetic to the situation of their colleague, Fr. Jenkins." Many are "supportive, but that doesn't necessarily mean they would do the same thing."

A large part of the problem stems from the "inherent deficiencies" of Catholics in Political Life, he said. "It is an inherently flawed document" over which "genuine disagreements" exist, he said, about what the document means and how it should be applied in particular circumstances.

It is a point similar to that made by Fr. Charles Curie, president of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, in an April 13 interview with NCR. Currie said that a tension currently exists between Ex Corde Ecclesiae, an apostolic constitution regarding the nature of Catholic higher education, and the U.S. bishops' statement on political life.

Currie said that 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.

Currie said that the Jesuit association had released no formal public statement regarding Notre Dame's invitation to Obama, but that many of the presidents had privately conveyed their support to Fr. Jenkins and many also "have been talking to individual bishops to see if we can't lower the volume and lessen the heat of the discussion."

Both Currie and Yanikoski noted that the version of the bishops' document on Catholics in Political Life was intended as a provisional or interim statement until a final draft could be agreed upon.

While the final draft has yet to be completed because the subcommittee of the bishops' conference with the responsibility for coming up with a final version was disbanded several years ago as a result of sweeping cost-cutting measures. The task was then shifted, said Yanikoski, to a working group that has yet to complete the task.

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