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Pray for a nation on path to a 'culture of death'

by Chaz Muth by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- The prefect of the Supreme Court of the Apostolic Signature at the Vatican told about 1,300 Catholics May 8 that they must pray for the U.S. political leadership to change course from policies leading the nation into an "anti-life" and "anti-family" culture.

During the sixth annual National Catholic Prayer Breakfast in Washington, U.S. Archbishop Raymond L. Burke also called the prospect of the University of Notre Dame granting President Barack Obama an honorary degree "the source of the greatest scandal," and questioned the Indiana institution's Catholic identity for honoring a politician who supports legal abortion.

Burke, former archbishop of St. Louis, expressed his disapproval that a majority of U.S. Catholic voters cast their ballot for Obama in last November's election and said they should reflect on the direction the country has taken since he has been in office. He mentioned a policy that allows funding for overseas family planning groups that provide abortions and moves by several states to make same-sex marriage legal.

He called on U.S. Catholics to have "open eyes to the gravity of the situation in our nation" and to be "clear and uncompromising" in a mission of ridding the country of the "great evils of contraception ... and so-called same-sex marriage."

As the keynote speaker of the prayer breakfast that drew Catholics from around the nation -- as well as politicians and ambassadors from several countries -- the archbishop spent most of his speech denouncing Obama's support for legal abortion and embryonic stem-cell research and Catholic politicians who vote for "anti-family" legislation, such as same-sex marriage.

In another apparent reference to Notre Dame, Burke said Catholic schools and universities must not honor those who push an agenda that goes against moral law, adding that a university that would give Obama an

honorary degree is "not worthy of the name Catholic."

The archbishop -- who is the first American to lead the Vatican supreme court -- also said it is patriotic to vote based on Catholic values and said nothing could justify casting a ballot for a candidate who supports "anti-life" and "anti-family" legislation, which he deemed "cooperation in evil."

He called on members of the audience to pray the rosary and not to get discouraged in their fight to reverse the nation's "culture of death."

Judith Kimmerling of Portland, Ore., was among the hundreds of Catholics who gave Burke a standing ovation as he concluded his keynote address.

"This is the first time I've come to this breakfast, and I felt that it was important for me to get here this year with all of the troubling things happening in our country," said Kimmerling, a 59-year-old parishioner of Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Portland. "This just highlights so many blessings we have during these very difficult times. I need this kind of thing to fill me up."

Other featured speakers at the prayer breakfast included Latin-rite Archbishop Jean Sleiman of Baghdad, Iraq, and Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, whose son -- Fr. Paul Scalia of St. John the Beloved Parish in McLean, Va. -- gave the invocation at the event.

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The Catholic justice urged members of the audience to have the courage to practice their faith proudly, even when others suggest the virgin birth of Jesus and his resurrection are anything but miracles.

Scalia said he has heard people in "educated circles" say that traditional Catholics "are poorly educated and easily led," but told the audience to hold on to their faith and "have the courage to suffer the contempt of the sophisticated world."

On a lighter note, Raymond Arroyo of the Eternal Word Television Network cracked a few jokes about the U.S. Catholic bishops.

"There are 12 bishops in that kitchen," Arroyo told the crowd just before breakfast was served. "You should see (Archbishop Timothy M.) Dolan (of New York) flip those pancakes."

He also honored the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist, and paid tribute to three high-profile Catholic leaders who died in the past year -- Cardinal Avery Dulles, a renowned theologian; Father Richard John Neuhaus, an author, lecturer and the founder of First Things, a journal published by the Institute on Religion and Public Life; and Thomas Dillon, the president of Thomas Aquinas College in Santa Paula, Calif., who died in an April car accident in Ireland.

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