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Accusation university mistreats Muslim students 'without foundation'

Mark Pattison Catholic News Service | Oct. 31, 2011

WASHINGTON -- The president of The Catholic University of America has disputed a complaint filed with the District of Columbia's Office of Human Rights over the ability of Muslim students to engage in worship at the university.

"That charge is completely without foundation," declared president John Garvey in a statement sent to all students, faculty and staff Oct. 28.

John Banzhaf, a public-interest law professor at George Washington University, also in Washington, filed the complaint against Catholic University in early October.

Banzhaf also had filed a complaint earlier in the year when Catholic University decided to return to same-sex dormitories in place of coed dorms.

No action on either complaint had been announced by Oct. 31 by the city's human rights office.

Garvey assailed Banzhaf in his statement.

"Banzhaf has created the perception that it is our Muslim students themselves who are offended by the symbols of Catholicism on our campus, and that they object to the absence of worship space set aside specifically for them," Garvey said.

"The fact is that no Muslim student at Catholic University has registered a complaint with the university about the exercise of their religion on campus. And today we learned from an article in The Washington Post that Mr. Banzhaf himself has not received any complaints from our Muslim students."

Garvey added, "I regret very much that our Muslim students have been used as pawns in a manufactured controversy."

One claim in the Banzhaf complaint is that Catholic University is denying Muslim students the same benefits that students of other religions are able to enjoy since there is no formal Muslim association sponsored by Catholic University, but its law school has an association for Jewish students.

The university has an association for Arab students, who may or may not be Muslim.

Wiaam Al Salmi, a Muslim student who recently started the Arab American Association, told The Tower, Catholic University's student newspaper, "The community here is very respectful of other religions and I feel free to openly practice it."

There are 122 Muslim students at Catholic University, up from 56 in 2007, according to Garvey.

"Our Catholic teaching instructs us to embrace our fellow human beings of all faith traditions," he said. "They

enrich us with their presence and help to promote interreligious and intercultural understanding.?

Banzhaf's complaint is a non-issue, according to Ibrahim Hooper, communications director for the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

"A Muslim can pray anywhere, practically, from a bus station to a classroom to a cubicle at work," Hooper said. "Particularly at a Catholic institution, you would assume that there would be Catholic symbols in locations throughout the university."

CAIR's website has a link to his statement to the Catholic News Agency.

Hooper added that such issues, including starting a Muslim student group, could be resolved through dialogue instead of legal action. "American Muslims have very good relations with the Catholic community," he said.

Banzhaf has filed successful discrimination complaints over the past 20 years, ranging from nonsmokers' rights to discrimination against women on the basis of higher prices charged by dry cleaners for women's shirts.

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