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Catholic college disinvites Vicki Kennedy as commencement speaker

by Jerry Filteau



Victoria Reggie Kennedy addresses the Catholic Charities USA centennial gathering in Washington in 2010. (CNS photo/Nancy Wiechec)

At the behest of Bishop Robert McManus of Worcester, Mass., a small Catholic college in his diocese has rescinded its invitation to Victoria Reggie "Vicki" Kennedy, widow of the late Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, to receive an honorary degree and to be its commencement speaker this May.

Anna Maria College in Paxton, a small town just northwest of Worcester, apologized to Kennedy in its March 30 announcement that her invitation to address this year's graduating class has been withdrawn.

Worcester diocesan spokesman Raymond Delisle told reporters McManus was acting in accord with the U.S. bishops' 2004 statement that "Catholic institutions should not honor those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles."

Kennedy said: "I am a lifelong Catholic and my faith is very important to me. I am not a public official. I

hold no public office, nor am I a candidate for public office. I have not met Bishop McManus nor has he been willing to meet with me to discuss his objections."

"He has not consulted with my pastor to learn more about me or my faith," she added. "Yet by objecting to my appearance at Anna Maria College, he has made a judgment about my worthiness as a Catholic. This is a sad day for me and an even sadder one for the church I love."

Anna Maria College, which has about 1,100 students, said it considered Kennedy, co-founder and president of Common Sense About Kids and Guns, an appropriate commencement speaker in light of her leadership on gun control and child safety.

McManus' opposition to her appearance, however, put the school in an awkward position, the college said in a statement.

"As a small Catholic college that relies heavily on the good will of its relationship with the bishops and the larger Catholic community, its options are limited," the statement reads.

Kennedy is a board member of Catholic Democrats, a national organization of Catholics seeking to advance the influence of Catholic social teachings in the Democratic Party, and of the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management, an organization of Catholic academic, business, philanthropic and other leaders devoted to promoting improved management of financial and human resources in the church.

Delisle told *NCR* that McManus acted because of Kennedy's "positions on pro-choice versus pro-life and the sanctity of marriage, his [the bishop's] defense of marriage between a man and a woman."

"I don't know what specific things he looked at," Delisle added. "He just said to me those were the two areas that he talked to the president of the college about."

In its coverage of the controversy on gltq.com -- which describes itself as "the world's largest encyclopedia of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual and queer culture" -- the site carries a link to a video of a 2010 fundraising event in which Kennedy, introducing an award to prominent gay rights activist David Mixner, says her late husband had long known and admired Mixner.

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"Teddy never doubted that in the end, the [gay rights] cause will be won -- not partial equality, but full equality; not second-class equality, but the right to live free, and to marry and to raise a family," she says in the video.

In recent years, the U.S. Catholic bishops have made support of marriage as only the union of one man and one woman a top public policy priority.

Steven Krueger, executive director of Catholic Democrats, said the event at which Kennedy made those remarks was not a public event but a private fundraiser for college scholarships for LGBT students, though the talk was subsequently made public on YouTube.

Several news reports also cited Kennedy's views on the legality of abortion in an op-ed piece she wrote for the *Washington Post* in 2004 as an apparent source of McManus' concern about her views on abortion.

NCR blogger Michael Sean Winters analyzed this opinion piece as a narrowly drawn argument about the viability of translating the Catholic church's moral opposition to abortion into governmental policy in a pluralistic society, as opposed to several other news reports that referred to the 2004 op-ed piece simply as pro-choice.

As Winters noted, the main thrust of the Kennedy piece -- that bishops should not deny Communion to Catholic politicians because their public policy approach to abortion is less strict than that advocated by the bishops -- is one most U.S. bishops also accept.

In a statement on the Anna Maria withdrawal of Kennedy's invitation as commencement speaker, Catholic Democrats sharply criticized McManus' action as "unjust" and "antithetical to our faith."

"The Board of Anna Maria College understood that Mrs. Kennedy's service to society and the church deserves to be recognized, as it has been previously by a number of institutions," it said. It noted that among those was Emmanuel College, a Catholic college in Boston that gave Kennedy an honorary degree two years ago. This year, Kennedy is slated to give the commencement address and receive an honorary degree at Boston College Law School, another Catholic institution.

In its statement, Catholic Democrats said it was disappointing that "Bishop McManus would not even take the time to discuss with Mrs. Kennedy his reasons for objecting to her appearance at Anna Maria College."

Delisle said McManus was not "trying to get into an elaboration of these issues or trying to attack Vicki Kennedy. He's just saying that, based on her public positions in these areas, which are core, from the bishop's perspective, to Catholic teaching, to honor her at a commencement as a Catholic is inappropriate."

Krueger took issue with that, noting that canon law says every Catholic is entitled to a good reputation [Canon 220] and that under church law a bishop has "no business judging [any Catholic's] faith until he talked to her proper pastor or to her."

"Who is or who is not a 'good' Catholic is not, under the church's law, for other members of the church to judge, but only for the person's proper pastors," Krueger said, quoting a canonical statement by Nicholas Cafardi of Duquesne University, a prominent lay canon and civil lawyer and former head of the U.S. bishops' lay National Review Board on clergy sexual abuse of minors.

In Kennedy's case, Krueger said, that would mean that McManus would have to consult with Kennedy herself or the bishop of Fall River, Mass., or her own pastor in her local parish in that diocese.

"He had no business judging her faith until he talked to her or her proper pastor -- that was the correct way to go under church law," Krueger said.

Canon 1341 of the Code of Canon Law says a bishop or religious superior "is to take care to initiate a judicial or administrative process to impose or declare penalties only after he has ascertained that fraternal correction or rebuke or pastoral solicitude cannot sufficiently repair the scandal, restore justice, reform the offender."

While McManus' successful effort to remove Kennedy from Anna Maria's commencement ceremonies does not technically fall under the code's rules for episcopal administrative or judicial processes to impose or declare penalties, the spirit of the code's restrictions on how a bishop may act in such circumstances seems clear: Before invoking any public penalty, even a prohibition on an honor, the bishop ought to

ascertain positively that lesser private paths -- "fraternal correction or rebuke or pastoral solicitude" -- do not suffice to "repair the scandal, restore justice, reform the offender."

Patrick Whelan, president of Catholic Democrats, told *NCR* he and others tried unsuccessfully to get McManus to meet with Kennedy and engage in a dialogue with her before asking Anna Maria College to disinvite her as its commencement speaker.

He said he told the bishop in a phone conversation that Kennedy had been working behind the scenes in the Obama administration to expand the religious exemption for insurance coverage by employers under new Health and Human Services rules -- and McManus expressed some surprise at that but was not moved to lift his objections to Kennedy as a commencement speaker.

"I asked him, can any Democrat speak at a Catholic college?" under the rules McManus has set out for commencement speakers, Whelan said.

In an interview with the Catholic Free Press, Worcester's diocesan newspaper, McManus said, "My difficulty is not primarily with Mrs. Kennedy. My difficulty is with the college choosing her to be honored by allowing her to be commencement speaker and giving her an honorary degree."

"My focus of concern is with the college. ... My concern basically was that to give this type of honor to Mrs. Kennedy would in fact undercut the Catholic identity and mission of the school," he said.

In the interview, which the newspaper posted Wednesday on its website, McManus lauded Kennedy's work in areas such as gun control and child safety but said that "the fundamental social justice issue in the teaching of the church is the right to life. ... That trumps everything."

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