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# Notre Dame faculty members call on bishop to retract 'incendiary statement' on Obama

Jerry Filteau | Apr. 23, 2012

Bishop Daniel R. Jenky of Peoria, Ill. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Almost 50 University of Notre Dame faculty members have urged Bishop Daniel Jenky of Peoria, Ill., to "renounce loudly and publicly" his recent comparison of President Barack Obama with Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler.

If he does not do so, they said, Notre Dame should seek the bishop's immediate resignation from the university's Board of Fellows.

In his homily [1] at a "Call to Catholic Men of Faith" Mass on April 14, Jenky denounced a new federal Health and Human Services regulation on health insurance coverage for reproductive services as an attack on the Catholic church and on Christianity itself.

He accused the Obama administration of "calculated disdain" for the Catholic church and a "radical, pro-abortion and extreme secularist agenda" -- one he compared with the Nazi attacks on religion under Hitler,

communist persecution under Stalin, the 1870s Kulturkampf (culture war) against the Catholic church in Prussia by German Empire Prime Minister Otto von Bismarck, and the early 20th-century attacks by French statesman Georges Clemenceau on church influence in public affairs in France.

Jenky said if the Obama administration does not rescind the regulation in question, U.S. Catholic schools, hospitals and social services nationwide will be forced to close down next year.

"This is not a war where any believing Catholic can remain neutral," he said

"This fall, every practicing Catholic must vote, and must vote their Catholic consciences, or by the following fall our Catholic schools, our Catholic hospitals, our Catholic Newman Centers, all our public ministries -- only excepting our church buildings -- could easily be shut down," he added.

Jenky's homily led Americans United for Separation of Church and State to file a formal complaint with the Internal Revenue Service, claiming the bishop's sermon was clearly political in violation of federal laws that allow churches and other tax-exempt nonprofits to address issues of public policy but prohibit them from endorsing or opposing specific political candidates.

The AUSCS complaint is reminiscent of one in the early 1980s against Cardinal Humberto S. Medeiros of Boston, which led to many years of court litigation, including several U.S. Supreme Court appeals -- eventually won by the bishops' conference, but at considerable legal expense -- over the fine dividing line between public policy advocacy by churches and their officials and the use of church pulpits to engage directly in political campaigns for or against a candidate for political office.

The Health and Human Services regulation, contested by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops as an attack on religious liberty [2], originally required almost all U.S. employers who provide prescription coverage in their health insurance plans to include coverage for artificial contraception and for certain morning-after drugs that many Catholic moralists regard as not just contraceptive but at least possibly abortifacient.

The original version of the regulation, issued in January, contained a narrow religious exemption for churches that conscientiously objected, but not for their ministries that served members of other faiths or employed members of other faiths, thus excluding the religiously run hospitals, schools and charitable and social service agencies that the Catholic church considers an integral part of its ministry.

After an outpouring of objections from many quarters that the regulation violated freedom of conscience of religious agencies, in February the administration revised the regulation to make insurance companies, rather than the religious employers, responsible for funding of the preventative reproductive services outlined in the regulation.

The revision satisfied many Catholic and other religious organizations who had objected to the original version of the rule, but the USCCB, the official national voice of the Catholic bishops on public policy and other issues, said the revision continued to force the church to cooperate directly in practices in violation of its conscience.

The Notre Dame professors said Jenky's comparison of the HHS regulation to the attacks on the church by Bismarck, Clemenceau, Stalin and Hitler was "profoundly offensive."

"Bishop Jenky's comments demonstrate ignorance of history, insensitivity to victims of genocide, and absence of judgment," they wrote in the letter. "We accept that Bishop Jenky's comments are protected by the First Amendment, but we find it profoundly offensive that a member of our beloved university's highest authority, the Board of Fellows, should compare the president's actions with those whose genocidal policies murdered tens of millions of people, including the specific targeting of Catholics, Jews, and other minorities for their faith."

The faculty members' letter, addressed to Notre Dame's president, Holy Cross Fr. John Jenkins and board president Richard Notebaert and released Friday, called for a university statement "that will definitively distance Notre Dame from Bishop Jenky's incendiary statement."

"Further, we feel that it would be in the best interest of Notre Dame if Bishop Jenky resigned from the University's Board of Fellows if he is unwilling to renounce loudly and publicly this destructive analogy," the letter states.

At a Woodstock Theological Center symposium April 17, at which four leading national journalists on religion and politics analyzed the approaching presidential election [3], *NCR* editor at large Tom Roberts expressed serious concern that on the HHS rule the nation's Catholic bishops may have, or at least may be widely perceived to have, elevated a fundamentally political question to the level of an essential issue of religious freedom.

Roberts said in the debate that has emerged so far, Jenky's homily was by far "the most intemperate" example of the possible shift from religious principle to political partisanship in the bishops' opposition to the HHS rule.

Read the Notre Dame faculty's letter [4].

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