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Sebelius should be allowed to speak at Georgetown

Maureen Fiedler | May. 17, 2012 NCR Today

Georgetown University is my alma mater (Ph.D. '77). I am delighted that Georgetown President John J. DeGioia has invited Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius to speak at the annual commencement. Her work for the Affordable Care Act has been commendable.

Although I personally wanted that health care legislation to include a public option and more, she and the Obama administration probably did as much as could be done, given the Congress at the time. But the law (assuming the Supreme Court does not overturn it) *will* achieve a major goal sought for generations: nearly universal health care coverage in the United States.

The bishops, it will be remembered, opposed the law because they had incorrect information saying it would provide funding for abortion. The nuns -- much better informed on many fronts -- supported the law. The nuns took a stand for the law, and became key players in garnering the last votes needed for passage. [An aside: That legislative effort by American nuns still sticks in the craw of American bishops, and apparently, the Vatican. The views of the nuns were seen as "authoritative" on Capitol Hill at a time when the bishops' views were being dismissed in many quarters.]

Against this backdrop, the bishops are creating a ruckus about "religious freedom" because mandates in the health care law require the purchase of contraceptive coverage. Although the administration has bent over backward to compromise and offer new exemptions, that apparently does not satisfy the bishops who seem bent on a political agenda that looks suspiciously like it is meant to favor the Republican Party.

Since Sebelius is involved in this mandate dispute, the bishops want her uninvited from Georgetown. No way! As DeGioia said in his public statement on this issue, "We are a university, committed to the free exchange of ideas." He also notes in the statement that Sebelius "was identified by students as a leading policy maker in our country who could contribute to this event."

In fact, this business of pushing to uninvite speakers with whom the hierarchy does not agree, usually on issues of sexuality or reproduction, violates the very mission of a university as a place for free exchange of ideas.

I trust that Secretary Sebelius will speak, and that she'll leave the students with lots of ideas to ponder.

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