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Georgetown alum, 'Exorcist' author: University should stop calling itself Catholic

by Daniel Burke by Religion News Service

The author who turned Georgetown University into a horror scene in "The Exorcist" plans to sue the school in church court, charging that his alma mater has strayed so far from church doctrine that it should no longer call itself Catholic.

William Peter Blatty, who graduated from Georgetown in 1950, says the "last straw" was the university's speaking invitation to Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius.

Sebelius, who addressed graduating public policy students on Friday, has been criticized by conservative Catholics for approving a mandate that requires many religious institutions to cover employees' birth control costs. The Archdiocese of Washington called the Sebelius invitation "shocking."

Blatty, 85, credits a Georgetown scholarship with fostering his writing career, which includes an Academy Award for "The Exorcist," a blockbuster based on his best-selling 1971 novel. In the book and movie, a Jesuit priest at Georgetown, the nation's oldest Catholic university, struggles to save a demon-possessed girl. Now retired, Blatty lives in Bethesda, Md.

"What I owe Georgetown, however, is nothing as compared to what Georgetown owes to its founders and the Christ of faith," Blatty said in a statement.

The author says Georgetown has violated church teaching for decades by inviting speakers who support abortion rights and refusing to obey instructions the late Pope John Paul II issued in 1990 to church-affiliated colleges and universities.

Georgetown should amend its ways or stop calling itself a Catholic or Jesuit institution, Blatty said.

A media spokesperson for Georgetown did not respond Friday to a request for comment. On its website, the university says, "Catholicism's rich and diverse intellectual tradition is central to Georgetown's academic life."

In response to criticism of the Sebelius speech, Georgetown president John J. DeGioia said last week the university is "committed to the free exchange of ideas" even if it does not agree with all of them.

Blatty's "indictment" against Georgetown charges the school with failing to recruit Catholic teachers and students, neglecting to instruct students in Catholic morality and failing to act in accord with church doctrine. He expects the suit to be filed in the Archdiocese of Washington's court of canon law this fall.

Blatty recently founded The Father King Society, named after a former Georgetown theology professor, to enlist fellow alumni in his cause.

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A similar church suit was brought against Georgetown in 1991 for authorizing university funding for a student group that supported abortion rights. According to Cardinal Newman Society President Patrick Reilly, the case reached the Vatican before Georgetown agreed not to fund the group.

The conservative Cardinal Newman Society has assisted Blatty's cause.

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