

New fight on a speaker at a Catholic University

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Among politically conservative Roman Catholics, Kathleen Sebelius, the secretary of health and human services, was already at the top of the list of Catholic public officials considered to be traitors to the faith.

As a two-term governor of Kansas, Ms. Sebelius was told by her bishop that she should be denied communion at Mass because of her support for abortion rights. As health secretary, she has been vilified for upholding the mandate in the health care overhaul that requires even religiously affiliated institutions to provide birth control coverage to their employees.

So there was an uproar when it recently became public that Georgetown University, a Jesuit institution, had invited Ms. Sebelius to speak at an awards ceremony this Friday, its commencement day.

The Archdiocese of Washington released a strong letter of rebuke to Georgetown's president on Tuesday afternoon, calling Ms. Sebelius the architect of the birth control mandate — "the most direct challenge to religious liberty in recent history."

The conflict is only the latest example of friction between Catholic universities and their local bishops, who are charged with ensuring that the universities uphold Catholic doctrine and exhibit an explicitly Catholic identity.

A conservative Catholic group in Virginia, the Cardinal Newman Society, has played an influential role as a whistle-blower, alerting bishops when they find a university stepping out of line. This spring, the group compiled a list of 12 Catholic universities with commencement speakers they found objectionable because of their support for abortion rights or gay rights.

"These conflicts are happening quite often," said Stephen S. Schneck, director of the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies at the Catholic University of America, in Washington. "We're very careful. I have to think when I make my invitations what's going to fall within the guidelines. And to a certain extent, it makes it difficult for me to do my job with my university program."

The Georgetown controversy has generated the most outrage since the University of Notre Dame gave an honorary degree and a commencement speaking slot to President Obama three years ago. Many bishops issued statements deploring the university's decision because of the president's support for abortion rights, but the speech went ahead as planned.

Victoria Reggie Kennedy, the widow of Senator Edward M. Kennedy, was disinvited last month from speaking at Anna Maria College, a small Catholic college in Massachusetts, after Bishop Robert J. McManus of Worcester criticized stands she had taken in support of abortion rights. However, Boston College Law School, also a Catholic institution, invited Ms. Kennedy to give its commencement address later in May.

The boundaries were drawn when the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued guidelines in 2004 that said: "The Catholic community and Catholic institutions should not honor those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles. They should not be given awards, honors or platforms which would suggest support for their actions."

The Cardinal Newman Society gathered 26,000 signatures on a petition urging Georgetown to disinvite Ms. Sebelius. The petition said: "Georgetown insults all Americans by this honor. The selection is especially insulting to faithful Catholics and their bishops, who are engaged in the fight for religious liberty and against abortion."

The bishops have made religious liberty a rallying cry. They accuse the Obama administration of infringing on religious freedom by requiring Catholic universities and hospitals to provide

health insurance plans for their employees that cover birth control. Ms. Sebelius was a central figure in formulating that policy.

In response to the controversy, Georgetown's president, John J. DeGioia, said it was the decision of the students at the Georgetown Public Policy Institute to invite Ms. Sebelius in recognition of her long service as a public official.

He also cited "her role in crafting the landmark legislation that will make health care more accessible to 34 million Americans who are currently uninsured," referring to the Obama administration's health care overhaul.

And, he noted, Ms. Sebelius is "the spouse and mother of Georgetown graduates."

A Georgetown representative said Wednesday that the university would not rescind the invitation.

Patrick J. Reilly, president of the Cardinal Newman Society, said he knew that his group's protests were having an impact because his annual tally of Catholic universities with objectionable commencement speakers was down 50 percent, from a high of 24 in 2006.

He said, "We do now have colleges that will confidentially contact us and actually vet their speakers with us, because they want to make sure that there won't be concerns."

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