

Notre Dame Draws Pro-Lifers' Ire

University Invites Texas State Sen. Wendy Davis to Speak

by Brian Fraga

SOUTH BEND, Ind. — Through passing resolutions, signing petitions and writing op-eds in the campus newspaper, pro-life faculty members and students at the University of Notre Dame are criticizing the university's decision to award Vice President Joe Biden with the prestigious Laetare Medal.

And now, the pro-life community at Notre Dame is also sounding alarms about a recent talk on campus delivered by former Texas state Sen. Wendy Davis, D-Fort Worth, who gained notoriety in 2013 for filibustering legislation that required new safety regulations for abortion facilities in that state. Several student groups, including the College Democrats and the Progressive Student Alliance, sponsored Davis' talk on April 4, which coincided this year with the feast of the Annunciation.

Dennis Brown, a spokesman for the University of Notre Dame, told the Register, "We have hundreds of lectures and events in the course of a year, and we certainly do not endorse the views of all. Many speakers do not agree with the Church on various important matters, yet we believe that our students, while encountering a range of views in a campus environment that nurtures and informs their faith, can learn to think critically and make judgments in accord with that faith."

Brown added that the Catholic position on the sanctity of life is "quite rightfully and forcefully articulated on a consistent basis" through speakers, presentations, awards, events and other forums on campus. However, William Dempsey, chairman of the Sycamore Trust, a group of Notre Dame alumni concerned with the university's Catholic identity, criticized the university's administration for how it handled the Davis situation. In a statement provided to the Register, Dempsey said: "What is really telling is how the gender studies department billed Wendy Davis as a heroine for her campaign in the Texas Legislature against pro-life legislation. Then they tried to cover up by pulling the notice after we had publicized it. How embarrassing!"

Mary Celeste Kearney, the director of the Gender Studies Program, told the Register in an email that the program was a co-sponsor "in name only" and said it was not involved in the planning or creation of publicity materials for Davis' talk. The notice that had been posted on the Gender Studies Program's website described Davis as "a passionate advocate for women's health care and other national issues which threaten our individual freedoms." The notice also credited Davis' 13-hour filibuster for temporarily blocking "devastating legislation seeking to limit women's access to abortions and reproductive health care in the state of Texas."

The Cardinal Newman Society, a nonprofit with the stated mission to "promote and defend faithful Catholic education," shared a cached version of the web notice. Patrick Reilly, president of the Cardinal Newman Society, believes the university "absolutely could have done something" to stop Davis' talk.

Dempsey added that the Davis situation was "unsurprising," in view of the university's decision to honor Biden, a Democrat and a lifelong outspoken Catholic who supports policies that are at odds with the Church's moral teachings on life and the sanctity of marriage. Said Dempsey, "People will naturally think that if Notre Dame thinks Biden is one of the most outstanding servants of the Church there can't be much wrong with his discarding these important Church teachings."

But pro-life student leaders and faculty members have called on the university to reconsider its decision, noting that Biden supports *Roe v. Wade*, arguing that he cannot force his personal acceptance that life begins at conception on other people. He also has embraced homosexual rights and praised the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling last summer that legalized same-sex "marriage."

Notre Dame will also present former House Speaker John Boehner with the Laetare Medal during commencement ceremonies on May 15. Boehner, a lifelong Catholic and Republican, has been criticized for his support of the death penalty. The university will honor Biden and Boehner seven years after President Barack Obama received an honorary degree and delivered a commencement speech at Notre Dame that sparked pro-life protests and objections from dozens of bishops.

Bishop Kevin Rhoades, the current bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Ind., said it was wrong for Notre Dame to honor any "pro-choice" public official with the Laetare Medal, since direct abortion is "gravely contrary to the natural law and violates a very fundamental principle of Catholic moral and social teaching."

In a statement provided to the Register, Holy Cross Father Bill Miscamble, president of the Notre Dame Chapter of University Faculty for Life, said, "The award to Vice President Biden simply cheapens the significance of the Laetare Medal. It also damages Notre Dame's commitment to the pro-life cause, both on campus and beyond it." On April 1, the Notre Dame Chapter of University Faculty for Life unanimously passed a resolution requesting the university rescind its award of the 2016 Laetare Medal to Biden. The resolution accuses Notre Dame of choosing to honor power at the expense of truth and adds that it is "never uncivil to stand in solidarity with the most vulnerable and defenseless among us."

Meanwhile, the Notre Dame Right to Life Club published a statement in The Observer, the campus newspaper, asking the university to live up to its Catholic identity and reconsider its decision, adding: "How can we bestow 'the most prestigious award for Catholics in America' to leaders who fail to protect the weakest and most vulnerable, a basic element of justice and a fundamental truth of the Catholic faith?"

The Sycamore Trust has also launched an online petition expressing support for Bishop Rhoades and urging the university to adopt a policy to preclude the Laetare Medal from becoming a source of scandal and division.

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