

Pope tells American Colleges to Strengthen Catholic Identity

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VATICAN CITY (CNS) -- Pope Benedict XVI called on America's Catholic colleges and universities to reaffirm their Catholic identity by ensuring orthodoxy in theological studies and accepting the oversight of bishops.

The pope made his remarks May 5 to U.S. bishops from Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona and Wyoming, who were making their periodic "ad limina" visits to the Vatican.

While he acknowledged recent efforts by America's Catholic institutions of higher education to "reaffirm their distinctive identity in fidelity to their founding ideals and the church's mission," Pope Benedict said that "much remains to be done."

The pope emphasized the need for compliance with canon law in the appointment of theology instructors, who are required to possess a "mandate" from the "competent ecclesiastical authority," ordinarily the local bishop.

The requirement for a mandate was underscored in 1990 by Blessed John Paul II in his apostolic constitution "Ex Corde Ecclesiae," but many Catholic theology departments in the U.S. have yet to comply.

Pope Benedict said that the need for a mandate was especially clear in light of the "confusion created by instances of apparent dissidence between some representatives of Catholic institutions and the church's pastoral leadership."

"Such discord harms the church's witness and, as experience has shown, can easily be exploited to compromise her authority and her freedom," the pope said.

U.S. bishops have clashed with the administrations of Catholic colleges and universities on a number of occasions in recent years, with some of the most prominent cases involving invited speakers who dissent from Catholic moral teaching.

In March, Anna Maria University in Worcester, Mass., retracted its invitation to Victoria Reggie Kennedy, widow of the late Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., to speak at the university's commencement, after Bishop Robert J. McManus objected to Victoria Kennedy's support for legalized abortion, contraception and same-sex marriage.

On May 4, Jesuit-run Georgetown University announced that Kathleen Sebelius, secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, will give the commencement speech at the university's public policy institute on May 18.

Sebelius, a Catholic, is currently at odds with U.S. bishops over the Obama administration's plan to require that the private health insurance plans of most Catholic institutions cover surgical sterilization procedures and artificial birth control. Chieko Noguchi, director of communications for Washington's Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl, said the cardinal had no comment on Georgetown's announcement.

In his speech to U.S. bishops, Pope Benedict said that preservation of a university's Catholic identity "entails much more than the teaching of religion or the mere presence of a chaplaincy on campus."

"In every aspect of their education, students need to be encouraged to articulate a vision of the harmony of faith and reason capable of guiding a life-long pursuit of knowledge and virtue," the pope said.

The pope contrasted the Catholic ideal of education with a current trend toward academic overspecialization.

"Faith's recognition of the essential unity of all knowledge provides a bulwark against the alienation and fragmentation which occurs when the use of reason is detached from the pursuit of truth and virtue," he said. "In this sense, Catholic institutions have a specific role to play in helping to overcome the crisis of universities today."

Pope Benedict said that reaffirming Catholic identity in education is part of a broader effort to build a distinctively Catholic "intellectual culture" in the U.S., and a "society ever more solidly grounded in an authentic humanism inspired by the gospel."

Although his remarks principally concerned higher education, the pope also praised the "generous commitment, often accompanied by personal sacrifice" of teachers and administrators in America's Catholic elementary and high schools.

Pope Benedict acknowledged the schools' efforts to ensure that Catholic education "remains within the reach of all families, whatever their financial status."

In a possible reference to proposals for greater public funding of religious education, the pope said that Catholic schools' "significant contribution ... to American society as a whole ought to be better appreciated and more generously supported."

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