

Bishop plays hardball, shuns Holy Cross graduation

By Richard Nangle
TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

WORCESTER — Bishop Daniel P. Reilly will not attend commencement at the College of the Holy Cross tomorrow, citing the abortion rights views of featured speaker and honorary degree recipient Chris Matthews of MSNBC.

The bishop's decision comes as some college alumni have been debating whether Mr. Matthews was an appropriate choice for commencement speaker. It will be the first time in Bishop Reilly's eight-year-plus tenure here that he has missed a Holy Cross commencement, according to college spokeswoman Katherine McNamara.

"It is my responsibility as the bishop of Worcester to teach and preach the church's position that all human life be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception," Bishop Reilly said in a statement.

"Holy Cross will confer an honorary degree on a Catholic person who publicly espouses the view that, in some cases, people have a right to terminate a life in the womb. I cannot let my presence imply support for anything less than the protec-

tion of all life at all its stages." In response, Ms. McNamara released a statement of her own, saying, "Bishop Reilly is a devoted friend of the college and we're sorry he won't attend commencement this year."

"As Father (Michael C.) McFarland has said, our speaker, Chris Matthews, has not questioned the Catholic Church's fundamental teaching on the morality of abortion," the statement said. "Where he would differ from some Catholics is on the role of government and how effective government can be in controlling abortion in a society like ours. This is a matter of practical judgment that is arguable within the framework of Catholic thought."

It was not an unprecedented move for the bishop, who in 1989 boycotted a commencement at Assumption College because Lt. Gov. Jane M. Swift, who supported abortion rights, was the featured speaker.

In 1996, Bishop Reilly pulled the plug on a Democratic rally that was to have happened at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Recreation Center. The rally was for Massachusetts Sen. John F. Kerry and then-congressional hopeful James P. McGovern of Worcester, both of whom are

abortion rights advocates. The Democrats ended up holding the rally at the Holiday Inn.

The selection of Mr. Matthews as this year's Holy Cross speaker and honorary degree recipient prompted former Board of Trustees Chairman Charles B. F. Millard to cry foul. Mr. Millard, a member of the class of 1984, mailed a letter to alumni asking the college to distance itself from Mr. Matthews by adding the following disclaimer to the honorary degree:

"We honor our loyal son today. As we do, we disassociate the college from his pro-choice position on abortion and pray for a change of his heart in line with the church teaching on abortion, so eloquently set forth in the recent Society of Jesus document, 'Standing for the Unborn.'"

In response, Rev. McFarland said Mr. Millard's view of Mr. Matthews' stance on abortion is oversimplified. He said he had received a few letters from "the usual suspects" on the matter, referring to alumni who have criticized the college for being too secular.

Mr. Millard, who received an honorary degree from the college in 1989, said he was pleased with Bishop Reilly's decision.

"I wrote him a lengthy letter and talked to two of his assistants, but only on procedural issues, nothing of any substance," Mr. Millard said from his home in Old Saybrook, Conn.

"It's puzzling to say the least that Father McFarland would persist in this quote, allowable within Catholic teachings, unquote, in light of the bishop's very strong statement contradicting that. The two do not square," he said.

Commencement speakers at Holy Cross are chosen by a committee headed by Ms. McNamara. Rev. McFarland reviews a likely candidate with the Board of Trustees, which approves the final choice.

Mr. Matthews, a 1967 Holy Cross graduate, is host of MSNBC's "Hardball with Chris Matthews." He is an author and former reporter for The San Francisco Examiner, serving as Washington bureau chief for 19 years. He was a speech writer for former President Jimmy Carter and a top aide for the late House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr.

"Chris Matthews represents Holy Cross in a wonderful way," Ms. McNamara said. "He has a probing intellect, engages in passionate discussions on the

most important topics of the day, especially moral issues, and shows a special care for the poor and marginalized in our society."

The choice of Mr. Matthews as commencement speaker also sparked controversy at the University of Scranton this year, where the bishop there decided to boycott the event because of

the commentator's abortion rights stance. "I do not take any vindication here on the stance that I have taken, I do take some vindication," Mr. Millard said. "The real winner is all the unborn babies."

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