

October 24, 2011

Mr. Nicholas Zeppos  
Chancellor  
Vanderbilt University  
211 Kirkland Hall

Dear Chancellor Zeppos:

I hope that you had an enjoyable Homecoming weekend. The campus is certainly a vibrant place with the alumni back. Vanderbilt Catholic was delighted to have a part in welcoming alumni as well. It is gratifying to see that for many alumni admiration for the work of Vanderbilt Catholic is included in the pride that they have for their university. The same spirit of collaboration between the ministry and the university is evident at Move-In Day and Family Weekend as well as when prospective students and families are visiting campus for the first time or later when they are weighing their acceptances. I am likewise proud that Vanderbilt Catholic offers so much to the life of the university, from a tailgate before the game Saturday, to Mass last night, to a lecture on Thursday at noon, to staffing the first Room in the Inn of the year in a couple of weeks.

In light of such fruitful collaboration, it is all the more distressing to see the relationship between the university and Vanderbilt Catholic threatened by the application of the university's non-discrimination policy to forbid religious qualification for leadership in religious student organizations. The proposed application will restrict freedom and diversity in student life by jeopardizing authentic religious expression. For the good of the university, I am writing to urge you to reconsider the application of the non-discrimination policy to allow for religious qualifications for leadership in religious student organizations.

The constitution of Vanderbilt Catholic has been found in compliance with the non-discrimination policy by the Dean of Students office, but I think the approval is based on an interpretation of the constitution that Vanderbilt Catholic does not share. Vanderbilt Catholic changed its constitution last year at the regular renewal time. At the time the student leaders simplified aspects of the constitution partially, in their words, "to get it on one page!" The submission of the new constitution was well before the current controversy, and no one at Vanderbilt Catholic considered the implications of the leadership requirements requested by the dean's office. It was too far from experience to imagine someone other than a practicing Catholic qualifying for a leadership role. Vanderbilt Catholic reasonably interprets its constitution to recognize that only practicing Catholic students qualify for leadership. Such students have always comprised the leadership, and this requirement is implicit in the mission of Vanderbilt Catholic.

The university is proposing unilaterally to decide who is qualified to represent the Catholic faith on campus. According to the proposed interpretation of the non-discrimination policy, the university maintains that any student is qualified to lead Vanderbilt Catholic regardless of religious profession. Religious profession is, however, a rational basis for determining leadership in a religious organization. It is not invidious discrimination. Vanderbilt Catholic cannot bend on this principle. I have consulted Bishop Choby, and he is in agreement. The Catholic Church could not sponsor an organization at Vanderbilt under these conditions. I hope that you will decide to make it possible for the collaboration between faith and reason to continue in an authentically Catholic student organization at Vanderbilt by deciding to apply the non-discrimination policy in a manner that recognizes the reasonable requirement of religious profession for leadership in religious student organizations. Free religious expression is an integral part of the intellectual life.

I thank you for your consideration, and I am at your service for any discussion or clarification of the issues raised in this letter. Please be assured of my prayers for you as you carry out the responsibilities of leading the university.

Faithfully,

Fr. John Sims Baker  
Affiliated Chaplain

Cc: The Most Reverend David Choby  
Dr. Richard McCarty  
Mr. David Williams, II  
Dr. Mark Bandas  
The Reverend Gretchen Person