



SPEECH FIRST

1300 I St NW Suite 400E
Washington, DC 20005

March 22, 2021

Dr. John J. DeGioia
President
Georgetown University
37th and O Streets, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20057

Sent via Electronic Mail (vicepresident@georgetown.edu)

RE: Free Speech at Georgetown University

Dear President DeGioia:

Speech First is an organization that is dedicated to preserving the First Amendment by fostering a lively marketplace of ideas on college campuses throughout the United States. We seek to defend and preserve First Amendment principles of free speech and expression through our advocacy and litigation. As President of Speech First, I am writing to implore you to protect these First Amendment principles on your campus by continuing to resist student calls to condemn and cancel the annual Cardinal O'Connor Conference on Life.

As you know, the Conference has been held annually on Georgetown's campus for over two decades and endorses the Consistent Life Ethic, which promotes opposition to abortion and the death penalty, as well as racial justice and access to healthcare. Moreover, the Conference has explicitly "condemn[ed] any sort of racism, injustice and discrimination" and has a history of "fighting for the rights of marginalized groups."¹ Despite these commitments, the Conference has long been targeted by Georgetown students who have called on the University to revoke support for, condemn, and even cancel the Conference and certain speakers. Such demands have escalated in vitriol and absurdity culminating this year with students claiming that a virtual conference made them feel unsafe and targeting Dr. Alveda King, the niece of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Sister Deirdre "DeDe" Byrne, a Catholic nun and physician.

¹ Paul James, "Cardinal O'Connor Conference on Life continues to draw controversy, sparks petition," The Georgetown Voice (Jan. 30, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3f5xT0J>.

Georgetown has admirably resisted such calls and reaffirmed that it “is proud to be a university that deeply values our faith tradition and that encourages the free and open exchange of ideas.”² To live up to the principles of the Free Speech Clause of the First Amendment, Georgetown must continue to reject demands to condemn events like the Conference and vigilantly maintain an environment of open discourse and free inquiry against calls to stifle speech.

The Supreme Court has long recognized that “[t]he vigilant protection of constitutional freedoms” such as freedom of speech and expression “is nowhere more vital than in the community of American schools [of higher education].” *Healy v. James*, 408 U.S. 169, 180 (1972). This “right to speak freely and to promote diversity of ideas and programs is . . . one of the chief distinctions that sets us apart from totalitarian regimes.” *Terminiello v. City of Chicago*, 337 U.S. 1, 4 (1949).

The First Amendment protects not only the speaker but the listener as well: “[f]reedom of speech presupposes a willing speaker. But where a speaker exists, as is the case here, the protection afforded is to the communication, to its source and to its recipients both.” *Va. State Bd. of Pharmacy v. Va. Citizens Consumer Council*, 425 U.S. 748, 756 (1976). Or as Frederick Douglass put it, “[t]o suppress free speech is a double wrong. It violates the rights of the hearer as well as those of the speaker.”³ American universities are “peculiarly the marketplace of ideas,” training future leaders “through wide exposure to that robust exchange of ideas which discovers truth out of a multitude of tongues, rather than through any kind of authoritative selection.” *Keyishian v. Bd. of Regents*, 385 U.S. 589, 603 (1967).

Those calling on Georgetown to cancel the Conference base their objections on its purportedly offensive content. But a university should “not suppress expression because it finds that expression offensive.” *Piarowski v. Illinois Community College*, 759 F.2d 625, 630 (7th Cir. 1985). “The discomfort and unpleasantness that always accompany an unpopular viewpoint” is a function of a free society and no university should silence speech just because students disagree with it. *Tinker v. Des Moines Indep. Cmty. Sch. Dist.*, 393 U.S. 503, 509 (1969).

As the president of a university, you have an emphatic duty to stand against the “mobocratic spirit”⁴ that animates calls to suppress the Conference. Without the vigorous exchange of ideas on campuses protected by the First Amendment, “our civilization will stagnate and die.” *Sweezy v. N.H. ex rel. Wyman*, 354 U.S. 234, 250 (1957).

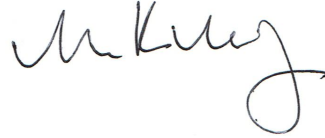
² “Editorial: End University Sponsorship of O’Connor Conference,” *The Hoya* (Jan. 29, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3cQueRF>.

³ Frederick Douglas, *A Plea for Free Speech in Boston* (Dec. 10, 1860).

⁴ Abraham Lincoln, *The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions: Address Before the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois* (Jan. 27, 1838).

Thank you for your time and consideration of these pivotal First Amendment issues.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nicole Neily". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end of the last name.

Nicole Neily

President, Speech First

Enclosure