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Victoria Kennedy tells BC law graduates to unite

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 26, 2012

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Victoria Reggie Kennedy called on Boston College law graduates Friday to seek change and justice by uniting people who may disagree, invoking a practice she said her late husband Edward M. Kennedy took to heart in the Senate.

Sidestepping the controversy that erupted earlier this spring when another Catholic college, Anna Maria College, rescinded an invitation for her to speak at its commencement, Kennedy spoke in personal terms of her

Catholic faith as a guiding force in her life.

“My husband described it well. ‘This faith,’ he wrote in his autobiography, ‘has been as meaningful to me as breathing.’ And I would add: as essential,” she said. “For me, it would be impossible to unravel my faith from the other aspects of my life, personal or professional. It’s all woven together.”

Outside the campus gates, a half-dozen antiabortion protesters held signs saying “BC Honors Abortion Defender.” But at the ceremony inside Conte Forum, there appeared to be no opposition to Kennedy’s appearance.

The 300 degree recipients, their families and friends applauded warmly as she approached the podium, then gave her a standing ovation after she spoke.

Kennedy, who grew up in Louisiana, noted that she went to Catholic school for more than 12 years and hails from “a family so Catholic that our childhood jokes had Latin punch lines.”

“My whole family’s faith was rooted in feeding the hungry, in caring for the sick and the poor,” she said. “It was the creed of social justice, a responsibility we didn’t broadcast, but one we lived and were deeply committed to.”

The controversy at Anna Maria had put Kennedy in the spotlight.

In March, two months before commencement at the Paxton school, Worcester Bishop Robert J. McManus



STEPHAN SAVOIA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Victoria Kennedy, widow of Sen. Edward Kennedy, spoke to Boston College Law School graduates on Friday.

A promotional graphic for an event titled "FUTURE M BOSTON". The text "FUTURE" is at the top left, "M" is a large stylized letter, and "BOSTON" is in large white letters. Below "BOSTON" is "OCTOBER 23-26, 2012". At the bottom, there are four statistics: "04 DAYS", "03 SPOTS", "100+ SPEAKERS", and "75+ SESSIONS". A blue button at the bottom says "BUY A PASS". The background is a dark cityscape at night.

04	03	100+	75+
DAYS	SPOTS	SPEAKERS	SESSIONS

pressured the college to disinvite Kennedy. The bishop cited what he said were Kennedy's views on abortion, health care coverage for contraception, and gay rights as reasons why she was an inappropriate choice for commencement speaker.

Kennedy responded with dismay, saying, "This is a sad day for me and an even sadder one for the church I love."

Boston College spokesman Jack Dunn said Kennedy accepted the invitation to speak at BC before the controversy erupted at Anna Maria. BC reaffirmed its selection of Kennedy as speaker.

"Mrs. Kennedy practiced law for nearly 20 years and shares our graduates' interests in public policy and the legal profession," the school said in a prepared statement. "She is also committed to social justice, a fundamental aspect of a Boston College Law School education."

Terrence Donilon, spokesman for the Boston Archdiocese, declined to comment on BC's decision to invite Kennedy.

Both he and Dunn said such decisions should be guided by a statement the US Conference of Catholic Bishops issued in 2004, entitled "Catholics in Political Life."

That statement says in part: "Catholic institutions should not honor those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles. They should not be given awards, honors or platforms which would suggest support for their actions."

Kennedy did not receive an honorary degree. Dunn said that the law school decided about one decade ago to end its practice of bestowing honorary degrees to commencement speakers to better keep the focus on graduates.

Law graduate Sean Donnelly, 27, posed for photographs after the ceremony with family members, who said they are practicing Catholics.

"[Kennedy] had a wonderful message of, after graduating, going into service for others," Donnelly said. "It was very inspirational."

The graduate's aunt, Mary Jane Silva, said Kennedy's "secular message was outstanding, but her Catholic message was just something we have to ponder for a minute."

"I'm not sure how she reconciles her belief in the right to choose with Catholic teachings," Silva said.

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