

Notre Dame ‘Abortion Doula’ Talk was Unworthy of Catholic University

by Kevin J Jones

The University of Notre Dame’s local bishop has strongly criticized the Catholic university for hosting a “reproductive justice” talk featuring abortion doula Ash Williams, who described abortion as “a type of birth.” According to a National Public Radio profile, Williams’ role as an abortion doula is to provide “physical, emotional, or financial help to people seeking to end a pregnancy.” In remarks during the event on March 20, Williams, who identifies as a trans man, explicitly rejected the idea that the number of abortions should be reduced.

“Not surprisingly, inviting an abortion doula to provide an un rebutted case for abortion has prompted a great deal of concern and criticism around the country and in our diocese,” Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend said in his March 21 column for the diocesan newspaper *Today’s Catholic*. “I share these concerns and consider the decision to feature such a speaker on campus to be both intellectually unserious and unworthy of a great Catholic research university.”

Bishop Rhoades objected that the event sponsors provided an abortion facilitator “a platform for unanswered pro-abortion activism.” The lecture series, he said, “appears to be an explicit act of dissent from Notre Dame’s admirable institutional commitment to promoting a culture of life that embraces and affirms the intrinsic equal dignity of the unborn, pregnant mothers, and families.”

The series, titled “Reproductive Justice: Scholarship for Solidarity and Social Change,” is sponsored by the University of Notre Dame’s gender studies program and the university’s Reilly Center for Science, Technology, and Values. Several other bodies within the university and several external groups also provide support.

The series’ most recent event, “Trans Care + Abortion Care: Intersections and Questions,” was held on Zoom on March 20 and drew an audience of about 105 viewers. According to the website of the university’s Gender Studies Program, the event aimed to address “the intersections between trans care and abortion care.”

During the event, Jules Gill-Peterson, a history professor at Johns Hopkins University and self-identified trans woman, offered reflections and asked questions of Williams, described as “a Black trans abortion doula, public intellectual, and abolitionist community organizer.” Williams is based in North Carolina but is a decriminalizing abortion resident at Project Nia, a Chicago-based advocacy group that favors “restorative and transformative justice” instead of criminal incarceration.

“For the last five years, Ash has been vigorously fighting to expand abortion access by funding abortions and by training other people to become abortion doulas,” Pam Butler, associate director of Notre Dame’s gender studies department, said in the introduction to the event.

Williams’ remarks depicted abortion and birth as a false binary, as some gender activists view male and female as a false binary. “For me, abortion is a type of birth,” Williams said. “Abortion and birth could be binary, but I believe that it is a binary worth busting just like man and woman.” This contrasted with how others might see gender transition, abortion, and birth as “processes.”

“Not every person who has an abortion experiences grief or loss, but for the people who do, sometimes, societally, we say, ‘Well, that’s what they deserve,’” Williams said, contending that this is rooted in the “disenfranchisement of the choice to have an abortion.”

The first mention of Catholicism at the Notre Dame event came more than an hour into the discussion when Williams recommended the pro-abortion counseling group Faith Aloud. “It’s actually a resource that I use for Catholic people, for Baptists, for Buddhists, for all types of people who are religious [and] who want to have an abortion. They can talk to a priest, a bishop, a reverend, a minister, a shaman, they can talk to whoever they need to talk to to get a pro-choice answer from them,” said Williams, who added: “A lot of my job looks like connecting people to resources.”

CNA sought comment from Faith Aloud and its parent organization All Options to confirm the involvement of Catholic clergy but did not receive a response by publication. The faith-based counseling program offers “compassionate and nonjudgmental support from trained clergy and religious counselors,” according to the All Options website. Faith Aloud’s trained counselors include “clergy and religious counselors from a variety of faiths: Roman Catholic, Jewish, Unitarian-Universalist, Protestant Christian, and Buddhist.”

The Faith Aloud website recommends resources such as the website of Catholics for Choice, a pro-abortion front organization whose claim to be Catholic has been repeatedly rejected by the Catholic bishops. It also links to a purported Catholic priest’s blessing for someone about to have an abortion. The authorship of the blessing is credited to Rev. Chris Tessone of the “Independent Catholic Movement,” not in communion with Rome. The blessing is hosted on the website of the Reproductive Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

One audience question at the Notre Dame event came from a student, a self-described pro-life Catholic and prison/police abolitionist who thinks abortions can be reduced through comprehensive sex education, accessible contraception, and through “real financial and community support for pregnant women and parents. How can I explain to my pro-life friends and family that abortion bans and criminalization make everyone less safe?” the student asked.

Williams called this a “great question,” but added: “The first thing that I want to say is that this idea about reducing the amount of abortions, I just want to push back on that a little. Abortion is, for some, a form of contraception. That shouldn’t be limited, because we would never say ‘Oh, we should limit that birth control. We should limit people’s access to condoms.’ It may be that abortion isn’t something that should be limited for the same reasons that condoms and other forms of contraception shouldn’t be limited. Before abortion was criminalized, pregnancy is criminalized, right?” Williams added, contending that abortion bans “target mostly brown people and Black people.” People who “really need access” to abortion are “bearing the brunt of the criminalization aspect.”

Gill-Peterson suggested Williams took a position distinct from the “mainstream feminist position” of leaders and groups such as Betty Friedan and the National Organization of Women, classifying them as disproportionately middle-class and white. Gill-Peterson suggested it can be hard to see that the fates of “trans care and abortion care” are “entwined.”

Williams suggested that “transphobia” was to blame for this, adding: “I often come up against these fissures, these ruptures, as if I’m not allowed to talk about trans care and abortion care at the same time, and my Black trans abortion.” Instead, Williams advocated a trans-centered reproductive justice movement that, for example, would not need to rewrite its PowerPoint presentations to be gender-inclusive. This movement is Black, “anti-state,” decolonial, and abolitionist toward the police and prison systems.

The speaker also referred by name to a Georgia group that funds abortions. “I want to end this by saying fund abortion, support people,” Williams said at the close of the event. “You don’t have to be an abortion doula to help someone to affirm someone’s decision to give them good information about an abortion, and then to emotionally be there for them.”

Criticism of ‘Activist Propaganda’

Bishop Rhoades’ reflection cited reports that Williams has a left forearm tattoo of a tool used for manual vacuum aspiration — a type of abortion procedure.

He criticized the event as “simply a conduit for activist propaganda that is not merely wrong, but squarely contrary to principles of basic human equality, justice, dignity, and nonviolence that the Catholic Church, Notre Dame, and many others (including non-Catholics) have affirmed for millennia.”

The bishop said the gender studies department and the Reilly Center’s sponsorship was “a grave mistake in judgment that creates scandal. It is particularly troubling that Notre Dame’s Center for Social Concerns — whose mission involves ‘justice education’ — would support an event promoting the injustice of abortion and a series antithetical to the social doctrine of the Church.”

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