

After angering Catholics, White House honors teachers

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Following days of tension between the Obama administration and the U.S. hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, the White House on Wednesday (Jan. 25) heralded nine Catholic educators as "Champions of Catholic Education."

"Irony is the word of the day," said Sister Mary Ann Walsh, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

While Walsh appreciated a White House event to highlight the brightest lights of Catholic education, she couldn't help noticing that it came at a difficult time in church-administration relations.

Catholic officials are fighting new federal regulations issued Friday (Jan. 20) that require many Catholic institutions to provide insurance that covers contraception. Walsh also said she doesn't "understand the timing, two days before the anniversary of Roe v. Wade, when thousands of Catholics came to Washington to pray."

As in years past, Catholics were organizers and participators in Monday's demonstrations against the landmark 1973 Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion.

Obama administration officials said the event was timed to the upcoming 39th

annual Catholic Schools Week, sponsored by the National Catholic Educational Association.

"We are thrilled to recognize these extraordinary Champions of Catholic Education at the White House," Alexia Kelley, a senior policy adviser in the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, said at the event.

Catholic schools educate more than 2 million elementary and secondary school children; about 15 percent (307,000) of their students are non-Catholic.

The White House-honored educators included the Rev. John Foley, founder of a Chicago college preparatory school for at-risk youth, and Sister Jennie Jones, a New Orleans nun who helped hundreds of students continue their educations in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.