

Obama and Notre Dame

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When I first learned that President Barack Obama was invited to give the commencement address and receive an honorary law degree at the University of Notre Dame, I walked into McGeever's pub and told the boys that they would not believe which Catholic university was going to honor the president. "Don't tell me Notre Dame," Billy O'Connor said from behind the tap. When I confirmed his worst suspicion, all the guys at the bar were in a state of utter disbelief. Then came the anger.

Notre Dame is not just another Catholic school—it's named after Our Blessed Mother. Moreover, there is not a Catholic Irishman who doesn't root for Notre Dame every fall (save for those who are an alumnus of a Notre Dame opponent on game day). To top it off, Notre Dame is not Georgetown: it doesn't have a reputation of taking down crucifixes from the classroom or putting a drape over the Greek name for Jesus when the president speaks on campus.

It is more than practicing Catholics who are up in arms—it's the nation's bishops. In the nearly 16 years I have been president of the Catholic League, I have never seen the bishops more exercised than they are over the decision of Notre Dame president Father John Jenkins to honor President Obama. This will have repercussions way beyond May 17: the bishops have set anchor in the culture war. Once a collectivity becomes energized, it is difficult to repair to the status quo ante—it's not like a faucet that can be turned on and off.

What broke? In 2004, the bishops issued a document, *Catholics in Political Life*, that plainly said, "The Catholic community

and 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." Thus, for Notre Dame to honor a pro-abortion radical like President Obama is a slap in the face to the bishops.

It would be impossible to find a politician who is more pro-abortion than Obama. When in the Illinois state senate he led the fight to deny health care to a baby *born alive* as a result of a botched abortion. He opposed the U.S. Supreme Court decision outlawing partial-birth abortion. He has overturned by executive order abortion restrictions put in place by President George W. Bush. He is a proponent of embryonic stem cell research. He opposes the conscience rights of healthcare workers not to assist in or perform acts they find morally repugnant. He has appointed one pro-abortion activist after another to his administration. He has a 100 percent approval rating from NARAL, the most extreme pro-abortion group in the nation. And he told Planned Parenthood he would gladly sign the Freedom of Choice Act, the most sweeping abortion-rights legislation ever written.

Given Obama's credentials, and given what the bishops have clearly asked of Catholic institutions—to say nothing of Notre Dame's special status—it would have been remarkable if the bishops, as well as practicing Catholics everywhere, didn't explode. Moreover, Harvard Law professor Mary Ann Glendon, president of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences and former U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican, decided to turn down a prestigious medal on commencement day, so disappointed is she with Notre Dame's decision to honor her former student.

Abortion is not just another issue. Unlike the death penalty, which the Catholic Church presumptively opposes, abortion is "intrinsically evil."

Archbishop Raymond Burke, who formerly led the Archdiocese of

St. Louis and who now sits on Rome's Supreme Court, recently summed up the issue. "There is no element of the common good," he said, "no morally good practice, which a candidate may promote and to which a voter may be dedicated, which could possibly justify voting for a candidate who also endorses and supports the deliberate killing of the unborn, euthanasia or the recognition of a same-sex marriage as a legal marriage. The respect for the inviolable dignity of innocent human life and the integrity of marriage and the family are so fundamental to the common good that they cannot be subordinated to any other cause, no matter how good it may be."

People of other faiths who are opposed to abortion, as well as non-believers, fully understand why the bishops have laid down a marker: the time has come to hold up a big STOP sign to those whose concept of social justice doesn't extend to the unborn. What's at stake is the Judeo-Christian notion of protecting the least among us.

President Obama has every right to speak on any college campus, including Notre Dame. He should be invited to speak at Notre Dame law school. He should be welcomed to participate in a symposium. He should be greeted as a panelist or a discussant on some contemporary issue. But he should not be honored. No one has a right to be honored, not even the president of the United States.

(This is a slightly longer version of an article that appeared on May 15 in the Washington Times.)