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President Obama at Notre Dame

Richard McBrien | Apr. 13, 2009 Essays in Theology

After it was announced jointly by the White House and the University of Notre Dame that President Barack Obama would be this year?s commencement speaker and the recipient of an honorary degree, the predictable flak started coming in from the Catholic right, for whom abortion is the only moral issue that counts. Other members of that constituency include additional life-related issues on their agenda, such as embryonic stem-cell research.

Unlike the bishop of the Fort Wayne-South Bend, Ind., diocese in which Notre Dame is situated, I did not receive a heads-up phone call from the president of the university informing me that an invitation had been extended to Mr. Obama and subsequently accepted. I was as surprised as everyone else on the faculty that the President of the United States would be speaking at Notre Dame?s graduation ceremonies next month.

It was clearly a coup for the university that the President chose to include Notre Dame among the first academic institutions that he would honor with his presence this year. There isn?t another university (and that probably includes most Catholic universities) that would not have been delighted to have President Obama speak at its commencement exercises.

President Obama himself was well-advised to accept the invitation from the country?s most highly visible Catholic university. Although he won the majority of Catholic votes in the recent election and at this writing continues to have favorability ratings in excess of 60 percent, he also continues to be the object of criticism from some of the most conservative members of the Catholic hierarchy in the United States, whose dioceses happen to be in states that supported candidate Obama in November: Colorado, New Jersey, Wisconsin, Indiana, Florida, Pennsylvania, California, and Ohio, to name but a few.

Joe Feuerherd, publisher and editor in chief of the *National Catholic Reporter*, has written **one of the most pointed and effective rebuttals** [1] of the critics of the Notre Dame invitation. His counter-criticism focused on the inconsistency (and, to some extent, the hypocrisy) of the Catholic right, which is entirely selective in its outrage over alleged violations of Catholic teachings.

Some of them even protested the selection in 2005 of Sr. Helen Prejean as a commencement speaker at another Catholic university because of her opposition to the death penalty, even though the late Pope John Paul II insisted in his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium vitae* (?The gospel of life?) that, for all practical purposes, there are no conditions under which such executions can be morally justified.

These critics were also ?strangely silent,? Feuerherd wrote, when then-Vice President Dick Cheney spoke at The Catholic University of America in January 2005. Cheney, like Obama, opposes a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage (his daughter is in an open, same-sex partnership), and had -- and still has -- some ?questionable views on the ?intrinsic evil? of state-sponsored torture? -- not to mention his and President George W. Bush?s vigorous support of the preemptive war in Iraq.

Indeed, Feuerherd continued, President Bush also supported embryonic stem-cell research, ?though his policies

limit it to existing stem cell lines.? But that is ?a position directly counter to church teaching.?

?Similarly, despite his anti-abortion record, the president [Bush, that is] supports exceptions for abortion in cases of rape, incest or where the life of the mother is threatened.? That, too, is contrary to church teaching on the absolute sacredness of life, regardless of the circumstances.

In 2007 President Bush was invited by a former member of his administration, James Towey, president of St. Vincent College in Pennsylvania, to give the commencement address at this small Catholic school. There was ?not a peep? from the Catholic right - -a silence, Feuerherd concluded, that says more about the Catholic right than all the outrage and cries of scandal that have been expressed over Notre Dame?s invitation to President Obama.

An article on the national wire-services (3/25/09) noted that the local bishop had decided to boycott Notre Dame?s graduation exercises this year because of President Obama?s presence on the program. The bishop pointed to the President?s recent decision to federally fund embryonic stem-cell research.

But that wasn?t the end of the story. A well-known conservative Catholic laywoman, Mary Ann Glendon, professor of law at Harvard and outgoing U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, is this year?s nominee for Notre Dame?s prestigious Laetare Medal.

If only for consistency?s sake, one wonders why she, too, isn?t boycotting the ceremony. The bishop, however, revealed in a letter explaining why he would not attend the Notre Dame graduation that he had encouraged Ambassador Glendon to attend the commencement exercises and to accept the Laetare Award.

Strange sometimes are the ways of accommodation.

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