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Editorial: Partisanship and the pulpit

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Jesuit Fr. John Langan (see story [1]) is an exceptionally clear thinker. He makes the necessary distinctions seem obvious.

?The bishops are certainly right to condemn the moral evil of abortion and to warn us against the individualism, selfishness and greed which have had such a devastating effect on American culture and family life as well as on our financial institutions,? Langan, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin professor of Catholic social thought at Georgetown University, told a Capitol Hill symposium last month. ?But if they think they make their witness more credible and more effective by developing a *quasi-excommunication of the Democratic Party* [emphasis added] and by aligning themselves with politicians who think that combining pro-life slogans with American chauvinism and exercising American military power without regard to international criticism constitutes an adequate response to evil in the world, they are sadly mistaken.?

Langan hits the nail squarely.

The proximate cause of the latest anti-Obama tirade among the Catholic conservative cognoscenti, including many U.S. bishops, is the University of Notre Dame?s invitation to the president to deliver the May 17 commencement address. Most Americans, and most Catholics for that matter, have paid the brouhaha little attention -- they have other things on their minds.

A story with legs

But among the professional Catholic crowd -- those like the editors of this newspaper and activists left, right and center who make their livings tracking and commentating on the vicissitudes of American Catholic life -- this is, as they say in the news business, a story with legs.

Say the conservatives: How dare America?s premier Catholic university provide a prestigious platform and an honorary degree to the leader of a political party that embraces the ?culture of death.? Obama, we are told repeatedly, ?is the most pro-choice president in history.?

Say the liberals: Kudos to Notre Dame for engaging the president and his administration, which stands with us on so many issues and appears poised to make abortion reduction a genuine commitment even as it rejects steps to criminalize the practice.

We side, perhaps not surprisingly, with those who welcome the president to Notre Dame. The Catholic community should engage the president and his administration, laud it where appropriate, challenge it when it falls short. That?s not only good church practice, it?s our obligation as citizens.

Yes, there will be protests and the like in South Bend, Ind. (as there are when any president visits a college campus). One extremist Catholic group, the misnamed ?Cardinal Newman Society,? claims hundreds of thousands of signatures on a petition protesting Obama?s appearance. (There?s money in outrage, apparently: Witness the society?s recent fundraising efforts tied to the petition. That e-mail appeal notes, ?If necessary, the Cardinal Newman Society will go broke to help stop the Notre Dame scandal? -- fat chance that -- even as it urges recipients to ?send ... even a small (tax-deductible) contribution.?)

Nevertheless, we anticipate that the president will be warmly received at Notre Dame (particularly by the graduating seniors) and will use the opportunity to speak directly to the nation?s Catholic community.

The larger question, however, remains: How have we gotten to the point where an influential and vocal number of Catholics use the occasion of a presidential address on a college campus to vilify not only the invitee but also those who invited him?

The answer to that is provided by Langan. The Obama Notre Dame speech is simply the latest occasion (and the effort dates back more than a decade) for partisan conservative Catholics to issue a ?quasi-excommunication of the Democratic Party.? In other words, it is mostly about politics.

Some quick history: In September 2003 high-ranking members of the administrative committee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops met with some leading conservative Catholics, including the then head of ?Catholic Outreach? at the Republican National Committee. By July 2004, by which time pro-choice Catholic John Kerry had secured the Democratic presidential nomination, the full body of bishops approved a statement in which they said they would not countenance providing a ?platform? or ?honor? to pro-choice politicians and activists, or to those otherwise at odds with church teaching on issues such as gay marriage, at Catholic venues.

The bishops? ban, to say the least, lacked nuance, making no distinction between politicians and others who would use a church-affiliated venue to promote policies condemned by the bishops, and those invited to speak on unrelated public policy issues. Further, the policy failed to take into account that the bishops have little practical say over the administration of most Catholic universities, which are typically overseen by boards of directors made up largely of laypeople.

Who gets a pass

The policy, moreover, was largely impossible to enforce. When Vice President Dick Cheney spoke at The Catholic University of America in Washington in 2005 to address the question of Social Security reform, few took note that he was opposed to a church-supported constitutional amendment banning gay marriage, to say nothing of his advocacy of the ?intrinsic evil? of torture. He got a pass.

Likewise, when President George W. Bush spoke at St. Vincent College in Latrobe, Pa., at its commencement, few if any objections were raised to the president?s position on embryonic stem cell research (his administration was at odds with the bishops in this area), or the president?s support for exceptions to a total ban on abortion, or his failure to call for a repeal of *Roe* v. *Wade*. (There were some protestors, students and professors mostly, who objected to the Bush record on war and torture.)

Still, the ban on honors and platforms provided support to bishops and others who would use it to make partisan attacks and arguments.

?We know ... that adherents of one political party would place us squarely on the road to suicide as a people,? wrote Rockford, Ill., Bishop Thomas Doran in 2006. Said Doran: ?No doubt, we shall soon outstrip the Nazis in doing human beings to death.?

Wrote papal biographer and influential conservative pundit George Weigel: ?The Republican Party is a more secure platform from which Catholics can work on the great issues of the day than a party in thrall to abortion ?rights,? gay activism, and a utilitarian approach to the biotech future that is disturbingly reminiscent of *Brave New World*.?

Just last month, Robert W. Finn, bishop of the Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., diocese, declared before an audience of Missouri and Kansas antiabortion advocates, ?We are at war!? The combatants in this struggle ?may be atheists or agnostics, or of any religion, including Christian or Catholic? who oppose the church?s efforts to make abortion illegal. (Finn heads a diocese where a favored parish recently offered a Mass for which the intention was the ?conversion of Barack Obama.?)

In his speech, Finn noted that ?those who vied for the leadership of our country last November offered Americans a clear choice in this regard,? which might come as news to those who thought John McCain?s priorities, whatever his political posturing, did not include overturning *Roe* v. *Wade*. In fact, McCain famously waffled on the issue during his many years in the Senate and, according to testimony from his pro-life congressional colleagues, frequently stood in the way of legislative efforts to restrict abortion.

Litmus tests

Earlier this month, Scranton, Pa., Bishop Robert Martino continued his strange crusade against his state?s junior senator, Democrat Robert Casey. Casey, with a largely pro-life voting record, is slated to give the commencement address at King?s College in Wilkes Barre.

Martino?s litmus test this time was Casey?s vote in favor of the nomination of Kathleen Sebelius to head the Department of Health and Human Services. ?I do not believe [Casey] has the moral stature to stand before the graduates of a Catholic college to address them about their futures and the challenges they will face when on the most important issue of the day -- the sanctity of human life -- he cannot muster the courage to oppose the pro-abortion agenda which is currently being promoted in Washington,? said Martino.

It did not seem to matter to Martino that the country might need a HHS chief in the midst of a pandemic flu outbreak or that, whatever Sebelius? merits, the pro-choice Obama administration would have a pro-choice HHS department head.

Meanwhile, New Orleans Bishop Alfred Hughes says he will boycott commencement at that city?s Xavier University because the featured speaker is Donna Brazile. Brazile, a New Orleans native who has worked tirelessly to help the city rebuild after Hurricane Katrina, is most certainly pro-choice, but is also known for urging Democrats to be less doctrinaire on the issue.

In Catholic Democratic Party circles it is frequently said that only a small number, a handful really, of conservative bishops are banging the drum for the Republican Party. And yet, more than 60 U.S. bishops have expressed opposition to the Notre Dame Obama speech. Why is it assumed by progressives that most of those who remain silent do so because they support a more liberal line?

No, the goalposts have shifted in the U.S. episcopacy in the past decade -- and they have swerved in a decidedly rightward tilt on both the ecclesial and political spectrums.

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