

Wuerl Addresses Authority

Michael Sean Winters | May. 15, 2009 NCR Today

I love Washington Archbishop Wuerl and not just because he is my bishop. His [column in the current issue of the archdiocesan newspaper \[1\]](#) takes up the issue of "Catholic Universities and Ecclesial Communion" without vitriol, without demonizing anyone, and points to the issue at the heart of the matter "what you might call the intrinsically touchy issue" namely, episcopal oversight.

Wuerl cites the document "Catholics in Political Life" issued by the USCCB in 2004. Unfortunately, he quotes only one half of the relevant bullet point "The Catholic community and Catholic institutions should not honor those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles" while leaving out the second half: "They should not be given awards, honors or platforms which would suggest support for their actions." I think Father Jenkins has been very consistent in saying that the awarding of an honorary degree to the President does not "suggest support" for his position on abortion. And, I believe the bishops have done a good enough job teaching the Church's position on abortion that it is disingenuous to suggest that having the President to Notre Dame will "confuse" people about what the Church teaches.

But, back to the plot. Wuerl minces no words: "While everyone may not agree with how an individual bishop applies this principle for institutions within his own diocese, it, nonetheless, is the bishop's call. Communion in and with the Church obliges its members, even in practical decisions, to support the legitimate exercise of a bishop's responsibility." There are institutions and organizations that have a canonical mission, and those that don't. Notre Dame does, and so it is answerable to ecclesial authority. Groups like the Cardinal Newman Society or Catholics for Choice do not have a canonical mission and are answerable only to themselves. They may be convincing or not, but they do not have the authority that comes with ecclesial communion.

Universities also have a scholarly responsibility to follow the evidence of reason and to maintain a fierce independence from any external ideology that would threaten the exercise of that responsibility. There will always be a tension between that academic freedom and the "freedom of the children of God" that the Church proclaims. Let's hope that after Sunday's commencement, we can go back to relishing that tension instead of seeing it exploited to score political points against the President.

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[1]

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