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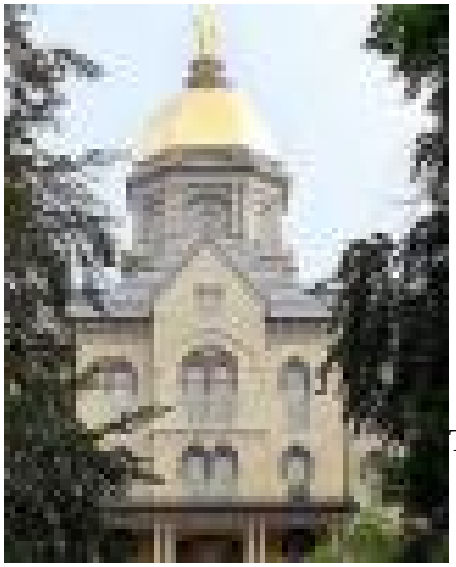
Notre Dame watch

Heidi Schlumpf | May. 15, 2009 NCR Today



The last time I attended a Notre Dame graduation, it was 1988 and I was receiving my bachelor's degree in American Studies. The speaker was civil rights leader Andrew Young, and Special Olympics co-founder Eunice Kennedy Shriver received the *Laetare Medal*. They both gave amazingly inspirational speeches, and no one--to my recollection--protested either of them, despite their status as Democrats. (Young is pro-choice; Shriver is pro-life.)

Those were the days.

Now I return to cover the most contentious graduation speech ostensibly in the university's history. I'm excited to hear Obama speak in person, since he rarely does so in Chicago (except the Grant Park acceptance speech), but I find myself sad for those graduates, whose day of celebration will be overshadowed by controversy, protesters, and (hopefully not) placards with aborted fetuses.

Still I wonder what I would have done if a controversial president had come to speak at my university when I was a student.

Oh, wait, one did.

In March of 1988, Ronald Reagan came to campus to speak at the official unveiling of the U.S. Post Office's Knute Rockne stamp. (Reagan had played George Gipp in the movie, Knute Rockne, All American.) Again, if there were protests, I don't recall them. I was already a budding Democrat, but more importantly I was working my way through school. So rather than protest the luncheon, I chose to work at it, as a catering server. Sometimes you've got to be practical.

I must say one part of me admires those students, like this one, who plan to make a statement by skipping the ceremony and instead attending a prayer service. "Notre Dame has prepared me to live out my life as a Catholic,

and this is one of those ways that I am doing that." said ND graduate Andrew Chronister.

Maybe I would have done the same, if my graduation speaker was against everything I stood for. Still, I wish everything--especially joyous occasions like graduations--didn't have to be such a polarizing fight. Isn't there someone way we as Americans--or at least we as Catholics--can disagree respectfully and work toward conversation and consensus? We'll find out on Sunday.

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