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# Right wing warriors cause damage to the church

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**Analysis**
The images out of Notre Dame are similar to what transpired at Georgetown when President Obama spoke here: students were enthusiastic to hear from a president whose election was both a watershed moment in American history and a turn from the destructive and divisive politics of the recent past, while angry protesters at the gates denounced a betrayal of Georgetown's Catholic character.

If their apocalyptic shouts win no converts their cause, they are still quite successful in equating abortion with the sum total of Catholic concern about public life. The president had come to Georgetown to discuss his economic vision and policies. These were an enormous improvement over the market fundamentalism that has brought us to our current crisis and much closer to Catholic Social teaching, if not beyond critique. This central Catholic concern was once again obscured by what a colleague has called "the abortionification" of Catholicism.

The same dynamic is at work in the well-produced controversy at Notre Dame. President Obama is worthy of honor both as an office holder and for his political achievements. His first acts as president, contrary to the strangely hypothetical mantra of protestors did not include signing FOCA (which still has not even been introduced in this Congress) but rather closed Guantanamo and the CIA's system of secret prisons, and forbid the use of waterboarding in interrogations. He has ended funding for nuclear weapons development and he has made abortion reduction one of the central focuses of his administration.

Certainly there are serious differences on abortion rights, but there is much for a Catholic University to support and honor. But, once again, all other dimensions of Catholic concern are eclipsed by the sole focus on abortion.

This exclusive focus is certainly driven by the sincere concerns of many committed to the issue. It is, however, also driven by the work of highly organized, politically motivated organizations that want both a wedge issue to win Catholic votes and a means to marginalize Catholic teachings that challenge their politics. The rightwing echo chamber is strikingly silent when Republicans such as John McCain or Condoleezza Rice speak or receive honors from Catholic universities despite their disagreements with the Church on life issues. These manufactured controversies are deeply harmful to both pro-life politics and to the Church.

While the extreme rhetoric and tactics of the organizers at Notre Dame gain media attention and energize their membership, they do nothing to convince those who disagree. Moreover, they alienate the vast middle of the American public whose support is essential to the pro-life cause. Their extreme rhetoric also threatens to derail the growing movement for abortion reduction policies. This has enormous potential to both reduce abortions and to open a space in American politics where pro-life and pro-choice citizens can work together.

The politics are no doubt, as daunting as their promise. Pro-life political capital is severely eroded when the President who as a candidate put abortion reduction into the Democratic platform and made it a major focus of the Office of Faith Based and Neighborhood Initiatives is derided as the "most pro-abortion president ever." Why would a politician risk alienating pro-choice groups for such a response?

The affair at the gates of Notre Dame illuminates a great threat posed to the Church as the bishops become increasingly identified with extreme groups in the public eye. As the nation, the majority of Catholics and, indeed, the Vatican were celebrating Obama's historic election and the new politics he has brought to the Whitehouse, individual bishops as well as the Bishops conference have embraced the most radical denunciations of the president.

They launched a church-based letter writing campaign against FOCA legislation, which even to this day has not been introduced in Congress, and their current stem- cell campaign warns against policies that the administration has explicitly rejected. Outspoken bishops have described Obama's election as "apocalyptic," his invitation to Notre Dame is described as an "embarrassment," another thundered "We are at war!"

At times it seems these bishops are living in an alternate reality. It is the world of the press releases and letter writing campaigns of radical pro-life groups and conservative political organizations. For too long, these groups have received the tacit support of bishops because of their ostensible orthodoxy and support of moral absolutes. (They have in fact deeply distorted traditional catholic teaching on the meaning of "intrinsically evil" acts and "scandal.")

Increasingly, such groups are the ones in control of the Catholic message. Randall Terry traveled to Rome to seek the ouster of bishops who would not allow him to distribute his manipulative voting guides at their cathedrals. Indeed the guidelines on speakers being invoked against Notre Dame's invitation were influenced by years of lobbying by the Cardinal Newman society. Indeed Bishop D'Arcy has distanced himself from Terry and discouraged members of his diocese from participating in his protests, but he and the other bishops who have spoken against the invitation were from the start trapped in media the script written by these organizations.

Abortion is beyond question one of the fundamental moral challenges of our of
our age. Unlike the single-issue organizations, however, Bishops' teaching responsibilities extend to the full range of Catholic teaching. Their ability to witness to this fullness is endangered by their proximity to these single agenda organizations.

The bishops don't control the bullhorn, which curiously seems to get turned off whenever they engage other issues such as poverty, health care, torture or war. A study by the Barna group warns that the young are less and less attracted to Christianity because they identify it with the agenda of right wing culture warriors. The Bishops' witness to the vital positive contribution that Catholicism can make to public life is threatened when they are perceived to speak with the same voice as the extremists at shouting at the gate. Pro-life politics is marginalized and the full range of Catholic concern is not felt in public life.

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