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What conscience dictates

Michael Sean Winters | May. 18, 2009 NCR Today

I hope attentive Catholic readers will take the time to consult Judge John Noonan's Laetare address yesterday at Notre Dame's commencement. I greatly admired Father Jenkins' speech, and thought the President's address was wonderful in parts but deficient in others, but Noonan's speech was sublime. The text and a video of his address are here [1].

Noonan pointed out that there is a difference between conscience and opinion. Everyone may be entitled to their own opinion, but some opinions are wrong. Conscience, too, can be wrongly formed, but as he pointed out as powerfully by his presence as by his prose, well formed consciences can reach different conclusions about many things. A person must always listen to his or her conscience. But, all of us must seek to bring our consciences into line with the demands of truth. People use the word "opinion" in a casual manner, like a set of clothes, something that suits an occasion and can be easily changed. The human conscience is the most formidable created thing in the universe.

The good judge spoke about those things we all know are wrong: genocide, torture and slavery. But, he also pointed out that there were times when there was no such consensus on these issues. "The clarity of our moral vision has come out of clashes," he said. "It has come by experience, by suffering, by strenuous debate. It has come by the insight and the courage of gifted leaders. It has come by the light radiating from the Gospel." Unfortunately, much of the opposition to the President's appearance at Notre Dame did not exemplify the "light radiating from the Gospel" so much as the talking points radiating from the Republican National Committee.

Now that the Notre Dame protests are in the rear view mirror, Catholics should listen to Noonan's words carefully and wrestle with their consciences more thoughtfully. And all should follow his sage words: "You may suggest what my conscience should say but you cannot tell me what my conscience must say."

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Links:
[1] http://commencement.nd.edu/commencement-weekend/commencement-videos-recorded/laetare-remarks/