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Obama at Notre Dame: Incomplete Eloquence

Douglas W. Kmiec | May. 18, 2009

The presidents were there in splendid form; the bishops were not.

Three presidents stood upon the stage: Father Jenkins, the embodiment of academic integrity informed by faith; Father Hesburgh, Notre Dame?s president emeritus and civil rights champion, and Barack Obama, whose inauguration just months earlier was greeted with virtual national euphoria, but whose visit to campus was claimed to be ?in defiance of church teaching.?

And the bishops? Sadly absent. Some, no doubt, honestly believed the President to be their antagonist. Most were silent. Notwithstanding repeated entreaties, the pastoral shepherds of the Church chose not to extend a simple pastoral blessing upon the graduates of the flagship Catholic university in America and their families.

God bless retired San Francisco Archbishop John Quinn, whose pension must be fully vested, since to my knowledge he alone conquered the intimidation of his peer group to praise President Obama for his ?fine example of married life and the love and devotion to [his] children? as well as his ?measured, thoughtful approach to issues of public concern. . . .?

In introducing President Obama, Father Jenkins completed Quinn?s much-needed act of Catholic hospitality and in so doing set the bar for the afternoon?s eloquence and insight extraordinarily high. From my teaching days at Notre Dame, I remember John Jenkins as a soft-spoken, scholarly Thomist who would think twice about asking even an overly talkative student to observe library silence. Yet, it was this man of gentle heart and unassuming mien who stepped to the podium and reset the terms of the whole debate.

The controversy, Jenkins noted, centered entirely on the invitation. "Less attention has been focused on the President's decision to accept." With that singularly important insight; much of the far right?s huff and puffery/ ?we are at war? rhetoric fell harder than an opposing quarterback trying to maneuver past a formidable Notre Dame line.

As Jenkins noted, President Obama ?is not someone who stops talking to those who differ with him." Indeed, this was and is the reason 54 percent of Catholics nationwide came to Obama?s side in the last election. This was and is an aspect of why more than two thirds of American Catholics approve of President Obama's early administration, notwithstanding the difference on life issues. Of course, to the discomfort of conservative partisans who had presumed to keep Catholics in a one-issue pocket in perpetuity, Father Jenkins relished making note of a leader who ?respects the role of faith,? whose witness ?transcends racial hatred,? whose goals of ?extending health care,? ?improving education,? ?promoting renewable energy,? beginning ?arms reduction,?

?fighting poverty and disease,? and ?reforming immigration.? These social justice matters might all be rank Catholic plagiarism were it not for their neglect in far too many parishes.

President Obama wasted little time addressing abortion, too. Calling it ?a heart wrenching decision with moral and spiritual dimensions,? he called upon the graduates to help reduce the number of women seeking abortions . . ., to make adoption more available and to provide care and support for women who do carry their child to term.? This, he knew, would not end the debate or settle all differences, since some are ?irreconcilable,? but differing views surely ought not to be reduced to caricature."

Graduation ceremonies are not academic symposia, as both George Weigel and the-last-minute-medal-declining-Mary-Ann-Glendon asserted in their outspoken criticism of Notre Dame. No, they are not, but Father Jenkins proved these celebrations to be what they must always be with world leaders, an opening of a channel of discussion, which the university president wisely observed, ?doesn?t begin and end in an afternoon.?

No, of course, it doesn?t. Yet, without the academic and faith-based discernment of Father Jenkins? invitation which opened the oval office door to the Catholic perspective and this President's implicit understanding and embrace of *Gaudium et Spes* ?to show respect and love to those who think or act differently . . .in social, political and even religious matters,? the ubi caritas prayer that ?all divisions cease? would have gone unarticulated.

The legendary four horsemen of Notre Dame have taken on a fifth rider.

Grantland Rice would have gladly added Barack Obama to that 1924 legendary ND backfield, except that those players inspired fear in their opponents. Obama conquers with a message of hope and a call for common ground ? and he did so masterfully on graduation Sunday, 2009.

Football metaphor aside, there is work to be done. In a few days, President Obama will likely nominate a woman to the U.S. Supreme Court. It?s probably too much to contemplate, but seated directly behind the President was Notre Dame?s highly respected law dean, Patricia Ann O?Hara. If empathy is truly to be incorporated into the legal process, there are few socially progressive lawyers more capable of incorporating this much needed sensitivity into legal interpretation. A securities law specialist, no derivative-wielding purveyor of subprime nonsense would escape Dean O?Hara?s justice.

Is it presumptuous to make such suggestion? Not really. Why would one keep the best talent a secret from a friend, and fellow alumnus. And, of course, she is pro-life. Now, that would be a game changer.

Go Irish!

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