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Why was Obama ND visit 'Eloquence Incomplete'?

Douglas W. Kmiec | May. 20, 2009

As suggested in the **my recent essay** [1], the most obvious incompleteness: missing bishops.

But there is a deeper level of incompleteness: the million plus abortions every year in this country. The speech was wonderful, but the real work remains. President Obama understands that. I know the talented young men and women now staffing his Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships do too.

Do the street demonstrators fully appreciate the need for the practical? Some do -- especially those who volunteer hour after hour at pregnancy counseling centers. They see the real anxiety faced by a woman in poverty or a college coed confronting God's unexpected gift of life under circumstances or at a time when that gift overwhelms. Yet, far too many churchmen in America, though perhaps not Rome given the highly receptive reviews of the speech, have become so fixated on changing the law that the humanity of the woman gets lost in abstract argumentation.

After the President?s description of abortion ?as a heart wrenching decision with moral and spiritual dimensions,? the most quoted passage of his Notre Dame address was a call to action, not debate:

"So let's work together to reduce the number of women seeking abortions by reducing unintended pregnancies, and making adoption more available, and providing care and support for women who do carry their child to term."
Yet, my pro-life friends ask: ?If there is nothing wrong with an unwanted pregnancy why do we have to reduce the number of women seeking abortions??

Hello, is anybody there? The question is odd, but revealing of the resistance to finding a common basis upon which to act. At the risk of over-thinking a question intended only to provoke, here is a useful syllogism:

Major premise: Most women would not want to choose, in the exercise of freedom, against life within them (President Obama: ?no one is pro-abortion; women do not make this decision casually?)

Minor premise: Some circumstances ? poverty, youth, illness, immaturity, lack of health care/insurance ? limit a woman?s freedom to choose life
Conclusion: Circumstances limiting the freedom to choose life should be addressed (rectified) so that a choice for life will not be disfavored contrary to the major premise.

The pro-life side remains stubbornly unpersuaded, asking defiantly: ?if it is really nothing more than an issue of

liberty and freedom for women, why do we have to make liberty and freedom rare for women?? What part of Obama?s ?moral and spiritual dimension? reference didn?t register? Probe more deeply and it is not what the President said at Notre Dame that disturbs the pro-life mind, but a statement made by candidate Obama in Pennsylvania. Referencing his two daughters, the President said in the context of a discussion of school education programs ?if they make a mistake I don't want them punished with a baby.?

Punishment?! The President, himself, has since described the remark as inartful. The penalty is not the child, but the denial of the joy of welcoming new life. In the fullness of God?s love, most of us have been fortunate to experience the happiness associated with the conception of our children. The very idea of birth announcements ? which by rights in Catholic terms really should be conception announcements ? conveys the point. However, a woman uncertain about the source of her next meal or who lacks health care for the physical ordeal and uncertainties that pregnancy presents, feels sadly burdened, not elated, by the news of an unexpected pregnancy. That sadness ? the deprivation of the joy of new life ? is indeed a practical punishment of the law of nature.

How can that incompleteness be overcome? Frankly, with a good deal individualized education and far more conversation than one could find outside the Joyce Athletic Convocation Center at Notre Dame on graduation Sunday. Abortion reduction will be assisted by President Obama's successful advocacy for economic and social support, but it actually happens when we ourselves are personally encouraging of the choice for life by those women within our smaller circle of acquaintance.

Of course, Catholic teaching admonishes attention to a third level of incompleteness ? the need for a legal regime that is fully protective of life. According to my pro-life friends, that's where ?your president should have begun.? With due respect, he is our President, and it has yet to be demonstrated how life is more respected by law?s coercion, rather than spiritual, economic and social interventions based in love.

There is a fourth level of incompleteness facing the President: choosing a Supreme Court nominee. Leftover Bush partisans scoff at the President?s call for empathy to inform judicial insight. ?Unthinkable,? intones the old boy?s network sporting their uniform Madisonian ties.

Perhaps not in the Bush administration with its rationalizations for torture and other matters of international embarrassment, and the odds are long even in this one, since the effort requires more re-education of the Senate than may be presently possible. Yet, one of the things I've discovered about the new occupants of executive office is that they are a welcoming lot, and in their version of democracy, even everyday citizens like me can bring to the attention of the President a person of extraordinary talent whose prudence and discernment outshines the presently entrenched thinking.

That's why, even as presidential eloquence may be incomplete, it occasions hope.

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