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Obama at Notre Dame: A conversation begins

Heidi Schlumpf | May. 27, 2009

President Barack Obama delivers his address during commencement ceremonies at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Ind., Sunday, May 17. (AP/Charles Rex Arbogast)

Notre Dame, Ind.

Although Barack Obama was invited to speak at the University of Notre Dame?s commencement because of his historic victory as the first African-American president of the United States, he may be remembered for something even greater: beginning a civil conversation between supporters and opponents of legalized abortion in a speech that earned praise from those on both sides of the issue.

For all the news coverage of finger-wagging bishops, bussed-in protesters and Alan Keyes being dragged off in handcuffs, the bigger story at Notre Dame?s 164th commencement was the respectful tone, not only from the president of the country and the president of the university, but also from the majority of graduates and other Notre Dame students.

In the end, it was pretty much like any other graduation. Black-robed graduates posed with beaming parents for pictures in front of the Touchdown Jesus mosaic before the ceremony. Afterwards they ran up the stairs of the golden-domed Administration Building, smiling for even more pictures at the top. And they cheered their graduation speaker, who just happened to be the president of the United States.

Sure, they had to drive past more than 200 protesters on the way into campus, many of them holding graphic signs of aborted fetuses. And there was the wait to pass through metal detectors before entering the Joyce Center arena. Then a few hecklers tried to disrupt the president?s speech, but they were quickly removed. All in all, the ceremonies went off without much of a hitch. The sun shone, as it?s practically guaranteed to do for Notre Dame graduations. Even parking was easy.

Although 20 or so graduates (of 2,900) chose to boycott the official graduation, and about a dozen wore yellow crosses and baby?s feet on their caps in a sign of protest, the majority of students either supported the university?s decision to invite Obama or decided to attend out of respect for the president of their country. (In

an unofficial gauge of sentiment, a Facebook group called ?We Will Be Honored to Have President Obama at Notre Dame? has 8,293 members, while the largest anti-Obama group, ?Tell Notre Dame to Un-invite President Obama? has only 2,234.) A few graduates wore ?Obama: Fine by me? T-shirts under their robes.

?I?m excited to see the president speak,? said Tony Ceravolo, a computer engineering graduate from South Bend, Ind., who was sitting in the sun outside Notre Dame Stadium before the ceremony. ?He?s the leader of our nation and the first black president. It?s historic. A lot of us are pro-life, but we also respect the president of the United States.?

Although the controversy around the president speaking was dining hall conversation when it was first announced, students quickly tired of the constant letters to the editor in the student newspaper and what became known as ?the abortion plane? -- which pulled a sign with a graphic photo of a 10-week aborted fetus.

?It?s kind of gross,? said Ceravolo. ?I wish they wouldn?t have gone to that extreme.?

Andrew Beroli, a political science major from Knoxville, Tenn., originally opposed the Obama invitation, believing that Catholic schools should follow the bishops? rule against hosting speakers who hold views opposing Catholic moral teaching.

But he chose not to boycott the event. ?I hope the respect we have shown as a class will help convince moderates and even some liberals that not all pro-life people are fundamentalist bigots? -- a reference to some of the protesters whom many students considered less than charitable.

At this comparatively conservative university, the protesters may have been preaching to the choir -- or to the media, which descended on the campus as if it were a national championship football game. Some students thought the media coverage portrayed the university in a bad light -- and not for inviting Obama.

?It?s almost a little embarrassing,? said Teresa McGreeney, a junior from Louisville, Ky., and reporter for the campus?s online radio station. ?I feel it?s such an honor to have the president come. We should be excited and respectful.?

Like many students, she described herself as more broadly pro-life than just antiabortion. ?There are a lot of other life issues that get ignored,? she said. ?I think Obama offers a real pro-life perspective. He?s trying to solve the problem, not just attacking abortion.?

Though most graduates didn?t let the controversy mar their special day, Jaime Luna of Ventura, Calif., thought the protesters were turning his graduation into a circus. ?This is a time for graduates to celebrate,? said the political science major who plans to volunteer with Teach for America. ?I don?t think this is the correct venue to protest.?

But his brother-in-law, Alex Luna, who was holding the video camera, added, ?It?s unfortunate, but we

understand that wherever the president goes, there will be people protesting.?

The activists on the streets outside the university were primarily out-of-towners who arrived on buses chartered by the Chicago-based Pro-Life Action League and Citizens for a Pro-Life Society, who together created the Web site **NotreDameProtest.com** to coordinate their opposition to Obama?s appearance.

?We want about 25 steps between graphic signs,? a yellow-shirted ?Staff? instructed those holding placards featuring bloody aborted fetuses -- what the Pro-Life Action League calls its ?Face the Truth? tour. Others held preprinted signs saying, ?Shame on Notre Dame? or ?Obama = Abortion.?

Although he has spent the better part of the past two months begging Notre Dame president Fr. John Jenkins to disinvite Obama, Joseph Scheidler of the Pro-Life Action League admitted the whole controversy has been ?a blessing in disguise? for the pro-life movement. ?It?s brought attention to Obama as an abortion supporter,? said Scheidler, a Notre Dame alum. ?It was God writing straight with crooked lines.?

But doctoral graduate Charles Camosy believes the protesters? lack of charity is an impediment to real movement on the pro-life issue. ?While I share their point of view, their methods keep us polarized and prevent us from changing anyone?s minds,? said Camosy, who received his degree in ethics and is teaching at Fordham University in New York. ?The truth can?t prevail if no one is listening.?

While several hundred students, parents and other protesters gathered with Fort Wayne-South Bend Bishop John M. D?Arcy on the South Quad lawn for an open-air Mass, march and alternative graduation prayer service at the grotto, Obama entered the Joyce Center to whoops and cheers of the more 10,000 graduates, family and guests in the basketball arena.

Both Jenkins and Obama tackled the controversy directly in their remarks to graduates. Jenkins pointed out that most of the focus had been on Notre Dame?s invitation, with little attention paid to Obama?s decision to accept.

?President Obama has come to Notre Dame, though he knows well that we are fully supportive of church teaching on the sanctity of human life,? Jenkins said to applause, ?and that we oppose his policies on abortion and embryonic stem cell research. Others might have avoided this venue for that reason. But President Obama is not someone who stops talking with those who differ with him. Mr. President: This is a principle we share.?

The class of 2009 showed their support for Jenkins? decision not to rescind the invitation by voting him as the Senior Class Fellow, an award traditionally given to someone who has had a significant impact on the graduating class.

The sustained cheers, standing ovation and multitude of flashbulbs that greeted the president when he processed in were repeated when Obama received his honorary degree, which specifically cited his ?willingness to engage with those who disagree with him and encourage people of faith to bring their beliefs to the public debate.?

A man tried to shout down the president and was escorted from

the center, just as the president joked that honorary degrees are ?pretty hard to come by. So far I?m only one for two as president? (a reference to Arizona State University?s decision not to give him an honorary degree). He also joked about his willingness to join the team named after him in Notre Dame?s Bookstore Basketball Tournament. ?Next year, if you need a six-foot-two-inch forward with a decent jumper, you know where I live.?

When another protester shouted ?Abortion is murder,? the crowd booed loudly, then erupted in the cheer, ?We are ? ND!? Obama responded, ?We?re not going to shy away from things that are uncomfortable.?

He didn?t.

Calling for ?fair-minded words? and a ?presumption of good faith? for those with whom we disagree, Obama received applause for this line: ?Those who speak out against stem cell research may be rooted in admirable conviction about the sacredness of life, but so are the parents of a child with juvenile diabetes who are convinced that their son?s or daughter?s hardships might be relieved.?

While admitting that ?the views of the two camps are irreconcilable,? he called for the kind of common ground that the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago sought. ?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 children to term,? he said.

In a possible policy change, he also promised to ?honor the conscience of those who disagree with abortion, and draft a sensible conscience clause.?

In a slightly less rousing speech, Judge John T. Noonan of the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals also encouraged debate in the effort to seek the truth about an issue that is both ?patently personal and significantly social.?

Conflicting consciences must be respected -- even among friends, he said. ?You may suggest what my conscience should say, but you cannot tell me what my conscience must say,? he said to applause.

Noonan said he respected the decision of a friend, Mary Ann Glendon, former U.S. ambassador to the Vatican, who declined the prestigious Laetare Medal rather than share the stage with Obama. Notre Dame decided not to choose another honoree and invited Noonan, who received the medal in 1984, to give the Laetare address.

?But I am here to confirm that all consciences are not the same,? Noonan said, ?that we can recognize great goodness in our nation?s president without defending all of his multitudinous decisions, and that we can rejoice on this wholly happy occasion.?

When asked if her happy occasion was marred by all this talk of abortion and politics, Allyson Brantley of Boulder, Colo., said definitely not. ?The whole weekend is about how great we are,? said the history major who plans a year of service at a middle school in El Paso, Texas, after graduation. ?It was nice to hear about something that reaches beyond us and affects the whole country.?

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Online resources

The full text of President Obama's speech is at NCRonlne.org [1] along with reactions to what he said.

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