

Notre Dame -- Opinion: With one of their own under fire, university presidents stood silent

Thomas Reese | Jun. 8, 2009

During the debate over President Obama's appearance at Notre Dame University almost everyone had an opinion and expressed it loudly: bishops, students, alumni, pro-life activists, TV pundits, editorial writers, Republicans, Democrats, Catholics and non-Catholics.

While some Republican activists used the controversy to exacerbate divisions between Catholics and Democrats, most of the protesters were sincere, if sometimes intemperate, just as the antiwar protesters of the '60s were sincere and sometimes intemperate.

Enough has already been said about the participants in this debate. Here I want to talk about the case of the dogs that did not bark, and I don't mean the 200-plus bishops who said nothing. A majority of bishops keeping silent while a minority takes center stage is not surprising. We saw that in the last two presidential elections.

What was surprising was that one group -- which knows more about Catholic higher education and had more at stake than most -- was AWOL during the entire controversy. The Catholic college and university presidents were silent.

"Why did they not speak out?" I asked myself during the long public argument. Why did they not defend their brother president, Holy Cross Fr. John Jenkins? Why did they not come to the defense of Notre Dame? Why did they keep silent? Yes, a handful did speak, such as Trinity College President Patricia McGuire. Georgetown University President Jack DeGioia also showed solidarity by allowing Obama to speak on campus. But most were silent.

Various theories were floated when I asked this question. Perhaps the presidents agreed with the critics of Notre Dame that a pro-choice president of the United States should not be invited to speak at a Catholic university commencement. Perhaps they agreed that he should not have been given an honorary degree. Does silence indicate consent? Considering the number of Catholic institutions that have been attacked for their speakers and degree recipients by the Cardinal Newman Society, I doubt this explanation. If presidents are not for academic freedom and autonomy, who will be?

Another theory is that the presidents actually took some pleasure in seeing Notre Dame under fire. After hearing it so often touted as the premier Catholic university that was truly Catholic (as opposed to their own schools), they were not all that unhappy to see it get its comeuppance. But surely, such pettiness would not blind them to the stakes that were at play in this dispute.

The third theory is that the presidents did not want to anger their own bishops. Many colleges and universities have good relations with their local bishops, and they want to keep them that way. Others have enough problems with their bishops and did not want a fight over an issue that was not local.

In this case, the presidents do not agree with Benjamin Franklin, who told the Continental Congress, "We must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately." Rather their mottos were: Keep your heads down, avoid conflict, let sleeping bishops lie.

The fourth theory is that the presidents did not want to anger the bishops as a whole. The presidents are in continuing negotiations with the bishops over the interpretation and implementation of Ex Corde Ecclesiae, the Vatican document governing Catholic higher education. They prefer that these discussions occur behind closed doors in a calm and reasonable environment. They do not want to risk upsetting these delicate negotiations. The Notre Dame fracas will pass, but these negotiations will have long-term effects on their schools. They will write private letters of support, but no public statements.

A fifth theory simply recognizes that trying to organize academics is like trying to herd cats. College and university presidents rarely act or speak as a group, except when they lobby for government money. And when it comes to drafting joint statements, every academic is a born-again editor. But as administrators, these presidents are not ordinary academics. They are supposed to be leaders experienced in organizing people for a common purpose.

Whatever the cause of this presidential silence, it was disappointing. The presidents owe Notre Dame and Jenkins an explanation; they owe Catholic higher education better leadership; their job is to defend academic freedom and autonomy. They stood silent while another educational institution was unfairly and viciously attacked. The next time when one of their institutions is under attack, they should not be surprised when no one comes to their defense. Benjamin Franklin was right.

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