

No push to punish Notre Dame for Obama invite

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 17, 2009



USCCB vice president Bishop Gerald Kicanas (CNS photo)

Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, Arizona, 67, is a Chicago native, former rector of Mundelein Seminary and a former auxiliary bishop in Chicago. Widely seen as a moderate and pastoral figure, Kicanas was elected vice-president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2007, which puts him in line to become president of the conference in 2010.

He sat down on the margins of the U.S. bishops' meeting this week in San Antonio to discuss the fallout from the debate over the University of Notre Dame's decision to award an honorary doctorate to President Barack Obama, and to invite him to deliver the university's annual commencement address May 17, despite the protests of dozens of bishops, and despite a 2004 conference statement which said: "The Catholic community and Catholic institutions should not honor those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles. They should not be given awards, honors or platforms which would suggest support for their actions."

(Read also Allen's interview with Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Curry of Los Angeles: [No consensus? on follow-up to Notre Dame flap](#) [1].)

Will the bishops discuss the Notre Dame/Obama case here in San Antonio?

It's not on the formal agenda, but someone certainly could bring it up — perhaps in the regional meetings.

Where you think things stand?

I think the bishops are united in our principles on the dignity and value of all human life from conception to natural death, and we're united in understanding unborn life as the most vulnerable and totally defenseless. Where there are differences, and they're understandable differences, is how to get our message out, how to make it more influential. It's more strategic, I think, where there are differences, and that's basically helpful.

When you think of the five priorities the bishops have established, one of them is the life and dignity of the human person. It's one the major concerns the bishops have. It's a conviction on the part of bishops, reflecting the teaching of the church, that human life has to be respected from conception to natural death. There's no

division among the bishops about that, as much as people might want to paint a picture of division. Bishops feel passionately about this issue, they're committed to this issue. But how best to make this teaching heard, how to make it convincing, that's where we may disagree.

Many bishops were publicly critical of the decision to invite Obama. Do you think that represents a consensus, or was it that bishops with a different view chose not to speak out?

My sense is that many bishops wanted to do what has already been done, which is that the bishop of the area, who is Bishop [John] D'Arcy, would have the responsibility to teach. He has done that. On occasion, the president of the conference speaks. I think that many bishops who didn't say anything believe that's the best way for the church to respond, for the local bishop to handle the situation. I think Bishop D'Arcy certainly made his position clear. He expressed his disappointment that he wasn't consulted about it, and he chose not to go.

But do you have the impression that there are bishops who were at least sympathetic to the argument that Notre Dame made in favor of the invitation?

I think the tension is that the bishops agreed on a statement about honoring politicians who hold positions contrary to the teaching of the church.

You're referring to the 2004 statement?

Yes. The honoring question, I think, was the most complex, and certainly one that many bishops spoke up about ? that it was not fitting in light of that statement to be honoring President Obama.

Do you think it would have been a different case if it weren't for the honorary degree ? that is, if it were simply him coming to speak without getting an honorary doctorate?

Bishops probably differ there. Some would feel that he ought not to be given a platform at all, because his positions have been so supportive of abortion legislation. Other bishops would not have been so concerned had he simply been invited to speak. Certainly, what concerned many bishops is that he was honored.

I think it's something that's going to take further discussion, further interaction between bishops and presidents of universities to talk through this, because the pressures on presidents are different than the pressures on bishops. Therefore, it's important that he continue this dialogue. I don't think there's any lack of clarity from the bishops on what we teach, but I think we have to continue to explore, understand, and appreciate what's the best approach to these very complex issues.

Will there also be discussion about what the bishops should do when a university doesn't follow your policies?

It may be that there was some lack of clarity about the statement itself. It did refer to "Catholic politicians" in the title. Certainly, most bishops probably understood it in a broader context, but there could have been some misunderstanding of that. Again, there's a need for more conversation with presidents of universities to help clarify what the bishops' concerns are and if some accord could be reached.

If that conversation does not bear fruit, do you reach a point where punitive measures have to be on the table?

I think the local bishop has to make some decision about an institution that calls itself Catholic in his own diocese. We have to approach that carefully, sensitively, more in a spirit of conversation. I don't think anyone

feels that President [John] Jenkins [the Holy Cross priest who heads Notre Dame] is a person of bad intention. He's a good man. He's deeply committed to the faith, as is the university. But we need to have dialogue and that's what Bishop D'Arcy was expressing ? the desire for some consultation.

If there was a Catholic university in my diocese, I would want to be in regular and continual dialogue [with its leadership], and to be present on the campus. The university community is a significant community in a diocese.

So far as you're aware, there's no push among the bishops to punish Notre Dame in some way?

I haven't heard that. There could be a bishop who would say that, but I haven't heard it.

You know this is a question many ardently pro-life Catholics are asking: If a university deliberately defies the bishops' guidelines, don't there have to be consequences? Otherwise, what's the point of issuing the statements?

You used the phrase "deliberately defied." I think that's a pretty harsh statement. If that's actually what they did, I think Bishop D'Arcy would feel affronted.

How else would you read it?

I don't know. That's a judgment, that they "deliberately defied" the bishops. They may have interpreted the document differently. ? The first thing is to be sure of what we are indeed saying, what we're agreeing to, and then bringing that to the institutions within one's own diocese. It is a dialogic thing.

Ultimately, I suppose, if someone is defiantly standing against what the church teaches, a bishop would have to take some steps ? i they're claiming to be Catholic, but defiantly opposing what the magisterium is saying is important in terms of our teaching. I think as bishops we have to understand exactly what we were saying, and then the local bishop has to decide how that gets played out in his own diocese.

Do you think there's a need for the bishops as a body to revisit that 2004 statement?

I don't know at this point. We'll have to see what would be helpful in understanding better what took place, and what would be helpful in seeing how this can be responded to. ? There is a forum for dialogue between bishops and university presidents, and it could be that this forum should take up the question. That's a place where some important conversation could take place. We ought to be on the same page as Catholic universities and the bishops.

How clear do you think the bishops' position is right now? For example, let's say a Catholic university president called you today and said, "We want to give an honorary degree to Vice President Biden." Would it be clear to you how you should respond to that?

I think a lot would depend on the circumstances of it. It's a theoretical question, so it's hard for me to answer. ? I think what is clear is that with the Notre Dame situation, there was quite an uproar. What that says to me is that there is a need for presidents and bishops to talk this through much more extensively, and to come to a better understanding of what's being asked. I'm not yet sure what forum that would take.

I think it's fair to say that Catholic university presidents are sincere in their commitment to the faith. They're involved in the handing-on of the faith. I've interacted with many of them on a number of occasions, and I don't see any bad intent on anyone's part. Something happened that's been disruptive, and that says to me we need to sit down and talk this through to come to some better understanding. I don't think anyone felt good about what took place.

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Speaking of dialogue, defenders of Notre Dame often argue that the point of inviting Obama was precisely to foster dialogue on a host of fronts, including the life issues. In your opinion, are there any circumstances under which it would be appropriate to invite a pro-choice politician to speak at a Catholic institution with the aim of promoting dialogue?

It's think it's a challenge. Let me give you an example in a different context. I wrote an op/ed piece maybe two years ago about Rep. [Jim] Colby [of Arizona] and the leadership he had shown in supporting countries that are struggling, gaining support from other legislators for funding and so on. Some people were upset about that, because he holds positions contrary to the church. He himself is gay. But the op/ed piece was not about those issues, but rather what's commendable in his leadership to secure funding for areas of the world that are in deep need. So, I think we have to be able to make distinctions. We have to be able to speak forthrightly when a particular position is held contrary to what we teach, but we also have to be able to affirm, applaud and support efforts that are commendable in other areas.

Are you saying that you can at least envision circumstances in which it would not be inappropriate to have someone with a pro-choice voting record speak at a Catholic institution?

I'm not saying that. What I'm saying is that the circumstances of each case are important. For instance, when Governor [Janet] Napolitano [now Secretary of Homeland Security] was still the governor of Arizona, she gave a eulogy at the funeral of a priest at whose bedside she was present for weeks. Some might say she has no right to give a eulogy at a Catholic church, but she was a dear friend of the priest who had died, and I didn't see it as a problem. This wasn't a forum for purporting any positions contrary to the teaching of the church.

I ask the question because the argument often made in favor of inviting pro-choice politicians to speak is that if we want to win hearts and minds, we have to engage the other side in dialogue.

It depends on what form the dialogue takes. I'm totally supportive of the idea. Cardinal George, the president of our conference, has spoken with President Obama. I think it was a helpful gathering, and I hope there will be other opportunities. There is a need for dialogue. Certainly President Obama invited dialogue, asked for dialogue. So again, this is a strategic question ? we shouldn't turn our back on these opportunities for dialogue, we ought to pursue them. The teaching of the church is understandable, it's able to be convincing, but we have to engage in those conversations.

So the tension is between dialogue and clarity?

The teaching of the church does go contrary to the grain, and we can't be afraid to speak up about issues that are not popular. On the other hand, we have to engage. We have to dialogue, we have to interact. We have to make our arguments and present them in convincing ways, and that takes interaction.

Many commentators, myself included, have drawn attention to the rather strikingly positive tone from the Vatican vis-à-vis the Obama administration. Have you been concerned about a contrast between the American bishops and the Vatican?

As within the conference itself, or between different episcopal conferences, there's sometimes a difference in approach. Again, that's not a difference in principle, but certainly in how one interacts with or engages political figures. There are differences, within the conference the in the larger church. The Vatican has always been open to engagement and has consistently pursued that effort. They certainly have a long history of experience in how to operate in complex situations. President Obama is involved on a wide front of issues, and many of them commendable.

So when L'Osservatore Romano runs an editorial after Obama's first hundred days saying he's not a pro-abortion president, you weren't troubled by that?

I actually didn't see the article, so I can't comment on it. As I said before, there are differences in strategic approaches to the situation. Does the Holy See have a different strategic approach than some bishops? I suspect that's probably true. ? But I don't think the Vatican has any interest in undercutting the conference.

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