NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Will Benedict keep open new space for reason

David DeCosse | Jul. 7, 2009

Pope John Paul II and then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Benedict XVI (CNS photo)

Analysis

The University of Notre Dame?s decision to award President Obama an honorary degree pried open much-needed space in the American public square for a more robust view of Catholic reason.

Looking to Obama?s July 10 meeting with Pope Benedict at the Vatican, the key question is: ?Will the pope keep open this new space or will he shut it down, returning the church to its dominant closed ecclesial reason of the last decades?

By ?reason? I refer to the processes by which we arrive at what is true. At issue are two processes by which we arrive through reason at truth. The dispute at Notre Dame witnessed a very public clash of these two differing Catholic conceptions of reason and for the first time in many years in the United States, the recently reigning view of reason within the Catholic hierarchy fared badly in a big public battle.

At issue, of course, were abortion and the ethics of awarding an honorary degree to the president. But these were signs of a deeper problem: The engine driving the affair was a disagreement within the church about how Catholic reason best works in a modern democracy. Seeing the dispute in this light helps explain why Catholic neocon Michael Novak decried Obama?s speech at Notre Dame for inviting ?capitulat[ion] to the new reasonableness, which is actually reason gone mad.?

For the last decades, the objective-universalist view of reason, highlighted and maintained by John Paul II, held great sway in American Catholicism. The complexities of the reasoning human person ? like emotions, prudence, and context ? certainly mattered to him. But what really mattered, in terms of reason attaining truth, was the recognition by reason of the truth of the objective, universal moral order. Moreover, for John Paul, even though this moral order was in principle accessible to all persons, it was nevertheless an order into which he, as pope on behalf of the church, claimed a special charism of insight.

This view of reason, John Paul thought, was an antidote to a powerful drift toward relativism in Western democracies. The issue of legalized abortion brought this conflict between reason and relativism into full view. As the late pope and his current episcopal sympathizers see it, the existence of the legal right to abortion in the United States is both effect and cause of a relativism understood as a refusal to acknowledge that there is moral truth at all. Abortion is legally permitted because Americans are afflicted with an attitude that at best claims, ?I

have my morality. You have yours. There?s no objective way to judge who?s right between us.? Moreover, in this view, the legal right to abortion abets this attitude: The permission granted by the law stirs a like-minded moral permissiveness.

This view of reason has the merit of affirming an objective basis for morality. But it has the demerit, among others, of a my-way-or-the-highway approach in which episcopal edicts on morality are assumed to resolve all sorts of difficult, practical problems.

And so we heard outcry of bishop after bishop. However, Notre Dame held its ground, and in the process, American Catholics were offered a glimpse of an alternative yet deeply faithful way of bringing Catholic reason into the public square.

Two things stood out about the reassertion of this view of reason. First, it was a view of reason oriented to persons seeking truth in different spheres of life. Thus there is a role for the reasoning by which the Catholic hierarchy establishes the truth about the morality of abortion. There is also a role for the reasoning by which the academic community evaluates the arguments advanced by the hierarchy. And there is a role, too, for the Catholic politician in using political prudence to determine the practical truth of complex matters like the use of the state?s coercive power in the enforcement of laws that may restrict abortion. All of these spheres are finally integrated in the order of reality. Even so, I think that the recovery of a more differentiated, contextual kind of Catholic thinking was one of the key points that Notre Dame President John Jenkins had in mind when he called in his commencement remarks for attention to ?the full potential of human reason.?

The second thing that stood out about the emerging view of reason was its connection to lived experience. This connection was evident in the remarks at the commencement by distinguished moral theologian John Noonan, who spoke of the rational process by which the clarity of moral vision is achieved ? a process marked by ?experience, by suffering, by strenuous debate.? The commencement also connected reason to the experience of love ? to active love, in sacred and secular space, within the church and among our fellow American citizens. Here President Obama?s now-familiar admonition ? repeated in his Notre Dame speech ? to listen carefully to those with whom we disagree takes on special significance.

Yes: Treating others in this way is a requirement of citizenship and of love. But, more than that, treating others in this way may reveal a truth that we could not see otherwise. As Obama put it, ?When we open up hearts and minds to those who may not think precisely like we do or believe precisely what we believe ? that?s when we discover at least the possibility of common ground.? Or, as Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner put it, ?In the heart of knowledge stands love, from which knowledge itself lives.?

Pope Benedict has said that the church?s tradition of reason should be a ?bridge? for the dialogue of cultures that plays a crucial role in the creation of the common good. But it is difficult to see how the closed, ecclesial reason of Obama?s Notre Dame opponents could provide such a crossing. To the contrary, the Catholic reason that triumphed at Notre Dame ? in its differentiated and lived quality ? provides an opening for this dialogue. May American Catholics keep moving into that fruitful and emerging space, whatever the outcome of this week?s Benedict-Obama meeting.

David DeCosse is director of Campus Ethics Programs, Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University.

Source URL (retrieved on *12/22/2014 - 21:28*): http://ncronline.org/news/politics/will-benedict-keep-open-new-space-reason