

Of graduations past, today and tomorrow

Joe Feuerherd | May. 12, 2011

It was, I clearly recall, a gorgeous spring afternoon in Washington the day I graduated from The Catholic University of America. My parents and in-laws joined the celebration. Dad treated us to dinner at Trader Vic's, the kitschy Polynesian-themed restaurant housed in the basement of the Capital Hilton. It was exciting and fun.

The nearly 2,000 Catholic University of America undergraduate, graduate and law students who receive their diplomas 26 years later this Saturday no doubt have similar feelings, aided by a boost of media attention. The event has made news because dozens of consistently ?pro-life? academics are using the occasion to remind Speaker of the House John Boehner, the commencement speaker, that ?pro-life? means more than outlawing or restricting abortion.

?A just framework for future budgets cannot rely on disproportionate cuts in essential services to poor persons,? they wrote in a May 12 letter to Boehner. ?It requires shared sacrifice by all, including raising adequate revenues, eliminating unnecessary military and other spending, and addressing the long-term costs of health insurance and retirement programs fairly.?

Hardly radical notions to anyone with even passing familiarity with Catholic social teaching. But at a time when supposedly serious people question whether Notre Dame should welcome the ?pro-choice? president of the United States to their campus, it becomes newsworthy.

Today, sadly, the academic ayatollahs of the so-called ?Cardinal Newman Society? have too much to say about speakers on Catholic campuses. Their modus operandi: search for heretical commencement speakers on Catholic campuses, find them, condemn their speech and the school that allows it, and then use the controversy to raise gobs of money to pay salaries and gin up more such direct-mail fundraising campaigns. This, trust me, is good work if you can find it.

Twenty-six years ago such kerfuffles were still rare. Looking at the picture of my graduation, framed in the family collage hung near the fireplace, I remember not controversy, but gratitude and optimism.

Gratitude went foremost to my wife, Becky, who married a naive undergraduate and didn't look back; that she tolerated the ?all-nighters? needed to complete a paper two years after her own graduation was an early sign of the love she would demonstrate daily throughout 28 years of marriage. Meanwhile, my mom and dad shouldered not only the tuition bill, but provided the kind of non-monetary support, I've since learned, only good parents provide.

My in-laws, moreover, welcomed me into their tight-knit (Presbyterian) family. They could have made life difficult; instead they helped make it easy ? with one exception. My religious affiliation (Catholic) posed no problem, but my political attachment (Democrat) risked putting asunder otherwise harmonious relationships. Over time, and some healthy if occasionally heated discussions and debates, we worked it out.

Optimism flowed because I was the luckiest SOB on the planet -- and I knew it. At age 22, I was married to the

young woman for whom I was intended. Who nowadays gets that lucky so young? And not only had I graduated, but I'd landed a job, and an impressive-sounding one at that. I was press secretary to one of the Democratic Party's rising stars in the House.

Meanwhile, my wife was teaching special education in a suburban Catholic elementary school. It was an innovative program for its time and she put her skills to high use (even today, few parochial schools have the resources to educate the learning disabled). We earned, between us, \$29,000. We could hardly have asked for more.

Graduation was the summation of all this. It was, for the reasons cited above, truly one of the great days of my life — easily in my personal "top 10." And the culmination of that wonderful spring afternoon would be the address by the commencement speaker, whose eloquence, I expect, is recalled by nearly no one this many years later.

Who addressed the Class of '85? You could waterboard me and I would not be able to come up with the right answer.

Which brings us, fast-forward, to John Boehner, the highest-ranking Catholic in the public sphere behind Vice President Joe Biden, third in line of succession to the president of the United States, antiabortion and pro-Catholic education, and, by most accounts, a decent guy.

Last election cycle, Democrats from President Obama on down tried to demonize Boehner, to make the election about the bad things the then-House minority leader would undertake if he held the speaker's gavel. The attack did not take.

Boehner's not the easily caricatured Newt Gingrich, the marionette-like Denny Hastert or the questionably competent Sarah Palin. Sure, he cries too easily (a strange but seemingly harmless affectation) and he's wanting in the charisma department. But he seems reasonable enough, a responsible fellow ultimately capable of the kind of compromise needed to keep the government functioning. Hardly the face of evil.

And in the annual game of get-a-name-commencement-speaker that our major universities play this time of year, Boehner definitely qualifies as a catch. Congratulations to new Catholic University president John Garvey for landing a big one his first time out.

In the controversy surrounding Obama's 2009 Notre Dame commencement address, the Catholic wing nuts from the Cardinal Newman Society and other enemies of academic freedom tried to get the president's speech canceled. Apparently, the \$200,000 shelled out for the classiest diploma in Catholic academia left the naive students incapable of distinguishing between legitimate Catholic teaching and the heresy promoted by the pro-choice Protestant president.

Note that the academics who wrote Boehner this year nowhere suggest that the speaker back out or that the university withdraw its invitation. They challenge Boehner's views, not his right to express them or Catholic University's prudence in providing him a platform. Good for them.

It is an honor for a university to hear directly from the president of the United States, the vice president, the speaker of the House and other significant government officials. The Newman Society and others who would ban speakers from Catholic campuses because of legitimate differences on issues like abortion should be ashamed of themselves. They simply do not understand the idea of a university.

In our society, in our political culture, the answer to disagreeable or even offensive speech is not censorship; it is, rather, more speech. Given the chance, people of goodwill can be persuaded. But the argument must be

joined, engaged, not snuffed out like so many fireflies on a warm summer's evening.

I suspect that when Saturday's Catholic University of America graduates look back on the ceremony many years from now they will remember who gave the commencement address ? at least vaguely. ?Yeah, what was his name, the crying guy who was speaker until Obama and the Democrats swept the next election,? one might recall. (To my in-laws: Becky became both a Catholic and a Democrat. Yikes.)

Once they remember who provided the inspiration, they will, I predict, be hard-pressed to recall what he said beyond the usual graduation platitudes. Commencement addresses do not lend themselves to memorable or significant oratory.

Boehner's speech may prove important (though that's doubtful), the content rich in debatable material (also doubtful). We know the speaker will have been reminded that Catholic social teaching is more complex than just-say-no to abortion. And, for a man with a busy schedule, that's all to the good.

The real good news from the Boehner commencement address? The speaker will offer his views, however heated or platitudinous, in the context of optimism and gratitude abundant in such a setting. Another generation moves up the ladder.

It should be fun. It should be exciting. And that's good enough, perhaps, for one brief moment.

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