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Playing to Crowds

Ken Briggs | May. 21, 2012 NCR Today

Notre Dame may falter on the gridiron but it's second to none in playing political football.

The university's announcement, with great fanfare, that it will join a suit against the Obama administration's modified policy that allows employees to obtain contraception without requiring Catholic institutions to foot the bill for it is the latest offensive.

Notre Dame and the others claim they would be forced to endorse practices that violate Catholic teaching even though the insurance companies themselves have agreed to pay for it. Presumably, they object to letting even non-Catholic employees simply process their claims on university forms.

University president John Jenkins denies this has anything to do with access to contraception. He echoes the "religious freedom" cry that argues that the Obama accommodation still ropes Catholic colleges into encouraging the very things the church abhors. Really.

The principle doesn't hold up well and it's hard to imagine it didn't face tough internal opposition, but the gamesmanship might. The move suggests an effort by Notre Dame in particular to win the cheers of bishops who remain resentful of the university's awarding of an honorary degree to President Obama in 2009.

That decision riled up Catholic conservatives and was denounced by many bishops. But politically it was smart. Most of Notre Dame's affluent alumni no doubt heartily approved of the Obama invitation so the university actually kept on the good side of their own constituents and donors. The highly publicized scoffers mainly came from outside. Touchdown, extra point.

Now comes the chance to appease bishops and conservatives who took the university to task for the Obama event. They may expect to earn their way into the good graces of those scalding critics as a means of achieving balance between advocacy of Catholic tradition and laboratory of progressive Catholicism, an image-formula which suits a role as American Catholicism's would-be spiritual and intellectual home. It was also an opportunity to show they were no softees when it came to Obama who had himself worked out the compromise to the satisfaction of a majority of American Catholics.

Every college and university finagles to promote itself and that involves a good deal of politics, usually in the form of selective disclosure and public relations tactics. But nobody does it better than Notre Dame.

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