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

Pope Francis & Notre Dame

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 31, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

Pope Francis' tough side came out Thursday. The mailed, hierarchic fist finally emerged from the velvet, pastoral glove. The pope received Fr. John Jenkins and the board of trustees of the University of Notre Dame, and he gave them a tongue-lashing. He criticized Notre Dame for failing to abide by the norms for Catholic identity set forth in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. The pope told the university leaders they had "prostituted" their Catholic identity by inviting President Barack Obama to give a graduation speech. And he warned them darkly that if they did not refuse to comply with the HHS contraception mandate, he would order them to stop calling themselves a Catholic institution. When Pope Francis finished his speech, he refused the out-stretched hand of Fr. Jenkins and instead wagged his finger at him, like Pope John Paul II did to Ernesto Cardenal in Nicaragua. The pope declined to greet the other members of the delegation and left the room in a huff. On his way out, he murmured in a stage whisper to Cardinal Donald Wuerl: "How can you stand with this riff-raff?"

Of course, none of that happened, but you can be forgiven for thinking that is what happened Thursday at the Vatican if you checked in with the conservative Catholic blogosphere. Fr. Zuhlsdorf cited the pope's comments, cheerfully referring to "Notre Shame University." The inappropriately named Cardinal Newman Society linked to Pope Francis' speech and added their list of grievances against the school. Even my usually balanced friend Rocco Palmo [1] said Pope Francis had "spiked the ball ... for the bishops" in his address to Notre Dame. To his credit, Rocco apparently had second thoughts about his reportage and made some changes in his post. Thus, what was only an "hourlong meeting" in his first post became, before bedtime, "a mostly effusive hourlong meeting."

The sentence that seemed to have all my conservative friends in a lather was when the Holy Father voiced [2] the "hope that the University of Notre Dame will continue to offer unambiguous testimony to this aspect of its foundational Catholic identity, especially in the face of efforts, from whatever quarter, to dilute that indispensable witness." Now, I am not an editor, but I can spot the verb in that sentence, "will continue," and methinks it suggests that the Holy Father wishes the University of Notre Dame to persist in something it is already doing. How that can be seen as spiking a ball, denouncing Notre Dame, or endorsing some of the vile and foolish things that have been said about the school is beyond me.

N.B. It was Archbishop Charles Chaput who said [3] Notre Dame was prostituting its Catholic identity by inviting President Obama and bestowing an honorary doctorate upon him. He cited at the time, and many commentators repeated Thursday, that Notre Dame's decision to invite Obama specifically violated a 2004 USCCB directive that said Catholic institutions should not honor those who oppose the Church's core teachings. Conservatives then and now overlook the fact that the title of that 2004 document was "Catholics in Political Life" and Obama is not a Catholic, but never mind.

The issue of Catholic identity is a real one. Unfortunately, the concept has been hijacked by conservative educational zealots who equate Catholic identity with a checklist of items that happen to tilt to a particular understanding of Catholicism and who, to my mind, perfectly exemplify the "self-absorbed promethean neopelagianism" that Pope Francis warned against in *Evangelii Gaudium*. If the future of Catholic higher

education in this country is Ave Maria University or Steubenville or Christendom College, better to say, if that is the only viable future for Catholic education, we are in trouble. Any bishop who thinks this should ask themselves a simple question. If you were hiring a lawyer, and the only thing you knew about two applicants was that one graduated from Notre Dame law and the other from Ave Maria law, which would you choose? C'mon, be honest. Excellence cannot be precluded from Catholic identity.

I actually believe the issue of Catholic identity goes deeper than even my most reactionary friends tend to think. The issue stirs my *Communio* leanings to their core. If, as I believe, and the Second Vatican Council taught, "The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him Who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear," then the way Catholic intellectuals approach everything, but especially issues relating to their fellow human beings, must be different from the way a non-Christian does. The empty tomb does not mean that 2 plus 2 no longer equals 4, but it does mean that the significance of mathematical, and all other, data is viewed differently. One of the most chilling experiences in my life was going to Auschwitz and reading the documents the Nazis kept, monitoring the increasing efficiency of their operations at the death camp. Here was science perverted. On what basis -- for surely it must be a nonscientific basis -- can we sustain the claim of perversion? So unlike some of my friends on the left, who think the Catholic academy should be a free-for-all, my principal concerns with the conservative checklist mentality is that it short-circuits a discussion that we need to have.

An example, one I think I have used before in these pages: A couple of years back, I was having coffee in New York with a brilliant intellectual whose work I had long admired. At a certain point in the conversation, he said something like this: "Two-thirds of our economic activity is consumption. That can't be sustained economically, environmentally or morally. I believe the Catholic intellectual tradition is the only tradition that even knows how to frame the right questions when it all starts to come apart." That is Catholic identity.

People who have attended Notre Dame tell me that the Catholic identity of the place is palpable. Someday, I hope to visit and ascertain that for myself. I will say that all of my friends who went there loved the experience and speak easily and fluently about how their time at Notre Dame strengthened their faith. To a number, this is the case. But let us assess the school's Catholic identity differently. What role does this university play in the life of the Church?

In November, I wrote about Notre Dame's ACE program [4], which for 20 years has been helping save Catholic elementary and secondary schools. In Tucson, Ariz., and Tampa, Fla., ACE literally saved five schools from closing, taking them over and turning them around, but here in Washington, D.C., ACE alumni have been a leaven to the parochial schools, and nowhere more than on the issue of Catholic identity.

Notre Dame is also working with Catholic Charities USA, [5] evaluating their programs to see how well they work, how they could be made to work better, bringing the university's best economists and other social scientists to increase the efficacy of the charitable arm of the Church.

The Institute for Church Life sponsors symposiums on a range of issues of importance to the life of the Church, including one next month on "Pastoral Issues in Science and Human Dignity." [6]These seemingly abstract discussions lay the foundation for very important, sometimes very difficult, ethical decision-making. The university is also hosting a major event on immigration in early March. The Center for Latino Spirituality is the place to go to discern the future of the Church in the U.S.

In May, the pope will go to the Holy Land on the 50th anniversary of Pope Paul VI's trip there and his seminal meeting with Patriarch Athenagoras. Among the trees that have grown from the seeds sown that day is Notre Dame's Tantur Ecumenical Institute, which Pope Paul VI specifically asked former Notre Dame President Fr. Theodore Hesburgh to begin. The institute is still going strong.

The list could go on. In many and varied ways, Notre Dame not only serves up an excellent Catholic education, it serves the needs of the universal Church. I retract none of my criticisms of academic theology, but I would be remiss if I did not note that Notre Dame's Theology Department is home to one of my favorite theologians, John Cavadini, and it was home until recently to another of my favorite theologians, Cathy Kaveny.

As for the hot-button issue of the HHS mandate, the school has generously lent its brilliant legal scholar Rick Garnett to advise the ad hoc Committee on Religious Liberty. And in case you missed it, they filed a lawsuit against the same president they gave an honorary degree to, re-filed the suit, and have now appealed an adverse decision to a high court. What else are they expected to do? One of Notre Dame's law professors, Gerard Bradley, criticized the school [7] for abiding by the mandate in the meantime. He seems to take the position that the U.S. bishops quite specifically declined to take, namely, that compliance with the mandate was forbidden, illicit material cooperation with evil. What to say? I am not a fan of Mr. Bradley. He gave a lecture about religious freedom at the Berkeley Center here in D.C. that repeated the whole "the Founders built better than they knew" nonsense, and James Madison was a "proto-Catholic," which would have been news to Mr. Madison, a talk that reflected a deeply flawed, and limited, reading of the historiography of the American Revolution and founding. Butler balances the truly offensive Gary Gutting in Notre Dame's philosophy department, but that is a discussion for another day.

Let me add one personal note. The day before Notre Dame re-filed its lawsuit against the HHS mandate, I spoke with Fr. John Jenkins, the school's president. It was not a long conversation, no more than half an hour. In that time, he never sounded like a political strategist. He never sounded like a legal analyst. He spoke as a priest, a priest charged with leading a very large, complex organization, but a very large, complex Catholic organization to be sure. His concerns were those of a pastor, not a politician. The fact he was unafraid to admit the decision to re-file was not an easy decision does not reflect an indifference to Catholic identity, but an awareness that the issues are complicated and not given to culture war sloganeering.

So, no, the pope did not spike any football Thursday. He did not trash talk the University of Notre Dame. He encouraged the school to keep doing what it is doing. If that sent some shivers up the legs of my conservative friends, that fact says more about the degree to which they have bought into the anti-Notre Dame narrative than it says anything about the pope's remarks or the fact that he greeted each of the attendees individually Thursday and that his embrace of Fr. Jenkins was, I am told, warm and lengthy. That was the real story Thursday.

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