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ND Gets Strokes From Papa

Ken Briggs | Jan. 31, 2014 NCR Today

You might say Pope Francis passed up a golden dome opportunity to drive home his recent lessons on economic injustice during his courtesy call with Notre Dame's board of trustees.

In typical feel good fashion, however he stoked the fires of mutual admiration, praising the university for its good works and pressing its caretakers to promote the church's sexual ethics, the ones he recently said were getting too much attention.

It was an the exercise in flattery that exempts valuable allies from the criticism leveled in general pronouncements such as the pope had delivered in his recent exhortation. That statement decried the excesses of capitalism, trickle-down economics and suffering inflicted by the power derived from riches and greed. The general alarm was aimed at nobody in particular.

Here, then, in face of trustees whose collective persona celebrates full throttle free enterprise and whose university's treasury boasts $6 billion, was the chance to urge the privileged to weigh their practice of social justice. Right there was a good sampling of the rich and powerful, Mr. Pope, so it's time to get serious. But the vinegar of hard talk turned into the spring water of camaraderie.

Notre Dame isn't much different from most well-regarded universities made up mainly of highly affluent students and an endowment among the richest in the country. Among the Catholic colleges and universities, it is by far the wealthiest and most publicized. Like others in the top bracket, it also sponsors an array social programs in the name of charity rather than social change. And that's exactly the point. The widely discussed inequalities in American society require changes in attitude and strategy from wealthy institutions and movements.

Nobody likes to think of their status as privileged. It's always the "other" guy who's causing the problem. Rich universities glorify equal opportunity, for instance, but do a very poor job at making it happen on their campuses. The percentage of students in the lowest income brackets, apart from sought-after athletes, is pathetically low. The craze for high rankings, among other things, eliminates most students from disadvantaged academic backgrounds. Universities like Notre Dame, apart from the rhetoric, just aren't trying. What's more, they exemplify the elitist lifestyle that the pope appears to censure as a factor in fostering human oppression.

For a welter of reasons, including the need for bonding and shared values, hard, honest talk dissipates on occasions where it might be used to good effect. Speaking to paragons of capitalism about where they get and how they use their institution's money (and their own) to further the cause of justice for poor and mistreated people might have been overridden by the need for solidarity, but in some respects the aftermath was sorrier for that choice. The university can feel blessed and approved in its limited moral agenda, whether its backers actually believe in those teachings, while not being reminded of economic morality which is on the whole much more painful and impolite to tackle..

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