



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on May 26, 2009

Notre Dame: Tragedy and Hope

“My father said he felt like a member of the family had died,” said Mary Daly, a junior at the university this year and president of the 1,000-member Notre Dame Right to Life group. Her brother, John, graduated from the university last year, and both their parents are Notre Dame alumni. One of their grandparents also attended the storied Catholic university, and a large number of aunts and uncles are proud alumni. “I never wanted to go anywhere else but Notre Dame,” said Daly. “Before I even knew or understood the concept of college, I wanted to go to Notre Dame.”



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But as this year’s senior class was preparing for its graduation ceremony, Daly was lending her active, moral, and prayerful support to the graduates, somewhere between 30 and 40, who chose to skip the commencement ceremonies to protest the honor bestowed on Obama. Other seniors decorated their graduation caps with a depiction of a cross and a pair of baby feet to protest the abortion policies Obama champions. Daly cited the statement of Bishop John D’Arcy of the Fort Wayne-South Bend diocese to explain how Notre Dame’s mission and Catholic identity were being undermined by the honor paid to Obama. “In the words of Bishop D’Arcy, the administration is seeking prestige over truth,” she said. “I think that statement still resounds.”

The Dalys were part of ND Response, an ad hoc coalition of 11 student organizations including the Knights of Columbus, the College Republicans, and the Saint Thomas More Society. On the night before the May 17 commencement, Bishop D’Arcy led a candlelight prayer vigil for the graduating seniors and their families. On the following day, as the graduates were gathering for the 2 p.m. commencement, ND Response held a rally at the main quad of the campus. The speakers included Chris Godfrey, a Notre Dame Law School graduate and former offensive guard for the New York Giants.

There were also protests outside the main gate, led by nationally known abortion foes Alan Keyes and Randall Terry. Also protesting was Norma McCorvey, “Jane Roe” of the infamous *Roe v. Wade* case that overturned anti-abortion laws throughout the country. (She has since become a fervent foe of abortion.) She was arrested with about 40 other people for criminal trespass, when they entered the campus to protest. And they were only part of the storm of controversy that has surrounded the university since the announcement in March that Obama would be the commencement speaker and recipient of an honorary Doctor of Laws degree. Hundreds of thousands signed online petitions of protest. Bishop D’Arcy was quick to say he would break with custom by not attending the graduation. Since then, at least 70 Catholic bishops across the country have criticized the decision.

In an interview with the *National Catholic Register*, Archbishop Raymond Burke, Prefect of the Vatican’s highest court, the Apostolic Signatura, said that Notre Dame should “come clean. Is it Catholic or isn’t it? A Catholic institution, a Catholic university, cannot give honors to someone who is a



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promoter of things that are opposed to the most fundamental beliefs of Catholics.”

Harvard Law Professor and former ambassador to the Vatican Mary Ann Glendon, who was to receive the university’s highest honor, the Laetare Medal, during the commencement ceremonies for her work in the pro-life cause, announced in April that she was turning down the honor. Glendon cited, as have many others, a policy statement adopted by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, stating, “Catholic institutions should not honor those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles.”

The Abortion President

As president, Obama has already lifted restrictions on federal funding for abortion and for embryonic stem-cell research. He has opposed bans, upheld by the Supreme Court, on late-term, partial-birth abortions. As a state senator in Illinois, he opposed legislation to require protection for infants born alive by abortion. Both as candidate and as president, he has declared his support of the proposed Freedom of Choice Act, which would declare abortion a fundamental right and prohibit any restriction or regulation of it. But at Notre Dame the president seemed to step away from his rigid adherence to abortion anywhere, anytime, indicating that he would approve a law that would allow doctors and nurses who oppose abortion for conscientious reasons to refuse to carry out abortions: “Let’s honor the conscience of those who disagree with abortion, and draft a sensible conscience clause,” he said in his commencement address. But the president has already moved against existing protections, said Charles Rice, professor emeritus at Notre Dame Law School.

“The Obama administration has already taken the first step in rescinding those rights,” Rice said. The president has rescinded regulations the Bush administration had put in place last year for implementing a federal statute that denies funding to healthcare facilities that do not protect conscience rights of their employees, the professor said. “Think of the thousands of Notre Dame graduates who are in health care. And this university is conferring its honor to a guy who is going to deprive them of conscience rights.” Rice, who has been teaching at the university since 1969, believes the university’s president, Rev. John Jenkins, and the Board of Fellows that govern the university have given scandal to Notre Dame and the Catholic faith with their choice of commencement speaker and honoree. “Father Jenkins and the trustees who supported this decision should resign in shame,” he said.

Ironically, when Obama gave the first commencement speech of his presidency a few days earlier at Arizona State University, he was given no degree. University officials decided to withhold the honor because “his body of work is yet to come.” The president made a joking reference to that in his speech at Notre Dame.

“I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but these honorary degrees are apparently pretty hard to come by,” he said. “So far I’m only one for two as president.” While acknowledging that “at some level, the views of the two camps are irreconcilable,” he urged those on both sides of the abortion divide to wage their battles without demonizing their adversaries. He was interrupted by applause several times as he spoke of discovering “at least the possibility of common ground.... So let us work together to reduce the number of women seeking abortions, let’s reduce unintended pregnancies,” he said. “Let’s make adoption more available. Let’s provide care and support for women who carry their children to term.”

But common ground was easier described than discovered. A few hecklers shouting “Abortion is murder!” and other slogans were removed from the auditorium as Obama spoke.

And even though it was surely no surprise that the National Right to Life Committee was among the organizations to speak out against the invitation, a letter from National Right to Life vice president



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Anthony J. Lauinger might have caught the attention of Notre Dame officials because of its bluntness. Lauinger is a Notre Dame alumnus, as are seven of his children (an eighth child is currently a student at South Bend). Expressing his outrage at “a betrayal of the university’s mission and an affront to all who believe in the sanctity and dignity of human life,” Lauinger wrote: “I have apologized to my eight children for the poor guidance I provided them when I encouraged them to enroll at Notre Dame.”

But many Notre Dame students and alumni supported the school’s decision. Kenneth Woodward, for 38 years the religion editor for *Newsweek* magazine, described himself as a Notre Dame alumnus who is both “adamantly pro-life” and “greatly pleased” that Obama was chosen as this year’s commencement speaker. In an op-ed piece in the *Washington Post*, Woodward noted that six other U.S. presidents, dating back to Dwight Eisenhower and including George W. Bush, have addressed the graduates at Notre Dame. “Politically, I had disagreements with each of them,” he wrote. “Yet I never supposed that by granting them the commencement podium the university was signaling its approval of their policies.”

Indeed, even previous recipients of the university’s Laetare Medal have not upheld the Catholic faith, including the late U.S. Supreme Court Justice William Brennan and the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Brennan’s award came in 1969, three and a half years before he became part of the 7-2 majority in the *Roe v. Wade* ruling that promulgated a constitutional right to abortion. But Moynihan’s was bestowed in 1992, long after the New York senator made clear his “pro-choice” position. As Woodward noted, Cardinal John O’Connor of New York flew to South Bend that spring for a meeting of Catholic bishops at Notre Dame, but refused to set foot on the campus in protest.

Last year Notre Dame was again the center of controversy when a play called *The Vagina Monologues*, celebrating gay and lesbian sexuality, was performed on campus. Father Jenkins decided to allow the production, but required that each performance be followed by a panel discussion in which the Catholic viewpoint was presented.

The University of Notre Dame was founded in 1844 by the Congregation of the Holy Cross. The order ceded ownership in 1967, however, to a Board of Fellows, made up of six religious and six lay people. Neither the bishop nor the Congregation of the Holy Cross had authority to veto the invitation to Obama, but apparently the Superior General of the order would not have done so if he could. “President Obama, the University of Notre Dame is honored to have you, as President of the United States of America, deliver the commencement address to the graduating class of 2009,” Rev. Hugh W. Cleary wrote to the U.S. president in a letter from Rome. “Personally, in so many ways, I admire you as a great American, a person endowed with extraordinarily well developed intellectual gifts and, in my opinion, a man whose enormous compassion characterizes the goodness of his heart.”

Before he was done praising Obama, Rev. Cleary did invite the president to “rethink, through prayerful wrestling with your own conscience, your stated positions on the vital ‘life issues’ of our day, particularly in regard to abortion, embryonic forms of stem cell research and your position on the Freedom of Choice Act before Congress.” Many Catholics, both lay and clerical, are not eagerly awaiting the outcome of a wrestling match between Obama and his conscience.

“Whatever else is clear,” said Cardinal Francis George, archbishop of Chicago and president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, “it is clear that Notre Dame didn’t understand what it means to be Catholic when they issued this invitation.”

Good Out of Controversy?

Catholic pundits have also weighed in on the controversy. Pat Buchanan, for example, published a



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column entitled, “Is Notre Dame Still Catholic?” Professor Rice said he hopes the controversy will force a reexamination of the decision that came out of the Land o’ Lakes (Wisconsin) Conference more than 40 years ago to make Catholic colleges and universities autonomous.

“I think the good that will come out of this is that the board will reconsider the decision in 1967 to sever its relationship with the Catholic Church,” Rice said.

The proclamation of the honorary Doctor of Laws degree praised Obama for having “opened a new era of hope in a country long divided by its history of slavery and racism” and as one “committed to human rights and the global common good.” Operation Rescue founder Randall Terry, recently arrested for criminal trespass during a protest demonstration on the Notre Dame campus, found that praise ironic. “The fact that Obama promotes child-killing around the world makes him the adversary — not the champion — of the ‘global common good,’” said Terry in an e-mail to pro-life supporters.

Michele Sagala, who grew up in Hammond, Indiana, said she had dreamed of graduating from Notre Dame for as long as she can remember. “I think pretty much all Catholics in the U.S. have a soft place in their hearts for Notre Dame,” she said. But on May 17, when most of her classmates donned their caps and gowns and were being saluted by the president of the United States, the 22-year-old senior was elsewhere on the campus, prayerfully protesting the honor her alma mater was bestowing on Obama.

“I’d been looking forward to it for years,” she said of her graduation. “But I think it’s more important that we stand for the sanctity of life and as a witness for those whose lives have been taken by abortion — for those who would have been graduating this year but won’t, because they weren’t even born.”

But while she opposed the university’s decision, Sagala remains a loyal daughter of Notre Dame. “I think this is what Notre Dame has been preparing me for, taking a stand for our faith,” she said. “There is so much good happening at this university. This one decision doesn’t reflect all that’s going on here, how people are concerned with the sanctity of life and with our Catholic identity.”

“The students are the best thing about this place,” said Rice. “These kids are great.” His esteem for the nation’s Catholic bishops was a bit more subdued. Those who spoke out against the invitation were roughly one-third of all the American prelates, he said. “So the question is, where are the bishops?” he asked.

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