



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on May 18, 2009

Obama's Commencement Address at Notre Dame

Norma McCorvey, aka "Jane Roe," the Texas woman whose suit against the state over its anti-abortion law led to the still controversial 1973 Supreme Court ruling, was one of about 40 people arrested and charged with criminal trespass Sunday when they entered the South Bend, Indiana, campus to demonstrate against President Barack Obama as commencement speaker and recipient of an honorary doctor of law degree. McCorvey gave birth to a daughter, whom she placed in adoption, while her 1969 lawsuit was making its way through the courts. She later became an evangelical Christian and embraced the pro-life cause.



Former presidential candidate Alan Keyes — also the Republican candidate against Obama in the 2004 U.S. Senate race — was arrested at the campus for the second time in a week on Friday and spent the weekend in jail, awaiting arraignment.

The demonstrations capped more than a week of pro-life activities, both on and off the campus, stemming from the decision by the Catholic university to invite Obama to address the graduating class and receive the customary degree. But the invitation sparked criticism and protest from Notre Dame alumni, church leaders, and pro-life advocates nationwide since it was announced in March. Opponents have cited Obama's support for legal abortion and federal funding for same, and his opposition to ban late-term partial-birth abortions, a ban upheld by the Supreme Court. The president's decision to allow federal funding for research embryonic stem-cell research has also been noted as yet another point that puts in opposition to the moral principles of the Catholic Church.

In announcing he would not attend the commencement, Bishop John D'Arcy of the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend accused the university administration of choosing "prestige over truth." Since then, at least 70 bishops from the 195 Roman Catholic dioceses in the U.S. have spoken out against the invitation. Bishop D'Arcy came to the campus on Saturday night and spoke at a pro-life prayer vigil staged by university students.

Some members of the graduating class skipped the ceremony in protest, while others wore a depiction of a cross and two tiny feet atop their graduation caps as a witness to the sanctity of life. Still other graduates sported the blue and white Obama logo that had been used in last year's election campaign. Most of the students, faculty, and family members in the audience greeted the president with loud and sustained ovation and several times interrupted his speech with applause and cheers. Addressing the controversy surrounding his appearance, Obama called on both sides in the abortion conflict to carry on their debate without "demonizing" one another. He drew loud applause when he called for Americans to "work together to reduce the number of women seeking abortions by reducing unintended pregnancies, and making adoption more available, and providing care and support for women who do carry their child to term."



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When hecklers shouted out “Abortion is murder!” and other slogans, they were removed by police, while students chanted, “We are ND!” and “Yes, we can!,” a chant frequently heard at Obama rallies during the presidential campaign.

While the choice of Obama as a commencement speaker at the Catholic university might have been enough to spark some of the protest, the conferring of an honorary degree appeared to violate a policy adopted by the U.S. Conference of Catholic bishops in 2004 stating: “The Catholic community and Catholic institutions should not honor those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles. They should not be given awards, honors or platforms which would suggest support for their actions.”

In a letter addressed to the graduating class last week, Notre Dame president Father John Jenkins of the Congregation of the Holy Cross said the college’s awarding of an honorary degree did not imply agreement with or approval of all of the views or policies of the recipient. But in addition to maintaining its Catholic mission and identity, Notre Dame must, as an academic institution, “engage the culture,” he wrote. Yet the proclamation of the degree is filled with glowing and unqualified praise of Obama.

“Through his willingness to engage with those who disagree with him and encourage people of faith to bring their beliefs to the public debate, he is inspiring this nation to heal its divisions of religion, culture, race and politics in the audacious hope for a brighter tomorrow,” the proclamation reads in part. In some minds at least, that has raised the question of whether Notre Dame is engaging the culture and politics of the secular world or embracing it.



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