

EDITORIAL:
PRESIDENT OBAMA, NOTRE
DAME, AND A DIALOGUE THAT
WITNESSES: A QUESTION FOR
FATHER JENKINS

• David L. Schindler •

“The burden of ‘witness’ rightly understood is not that one is unwilling to dialogue with another, but that the dialogue called for in given cases demands clarity from the outset regarding the gravity of what is at stake.”



(1) In its invitation to President Obama, Notre Dame started a controversy it surely could have anticipated would exacerbate divisions among Catholics in America. The controversy was not necessary: it did not come *to*, but was brought about *by*, the university. To say that the university went ahead with the invitation simply for reasons of prestige would be reductive. On the contrary, Father Jenkins stressed President Obama’s achievements regarding the economy, two wars and health care, immigration and education reform, and racial prejudice, even as he distanced the university from support of Obama’s positions regarding “the protection of human life, including abortion and embryonic stem-cell research.”

The primary reason for the invitation was thus to honor Obama, America’s first African-American president, while using the

event also as an opportunity for “further positive engagement” and “dialogue” regarding differences in the “life” issues.

My comment focuses on the nature of the dialogue implied by Father Jenkins’s invitation, in light of the reasons offered by him.

Father Jenkins says his expression of personal disagreement with President Obama regarding abortion and embryonic stem-cell research demonstrates that the honor extended does not “suggest support” for all of the latter’s actions. We can grant that Father Jenkins indeed does not support all of the President’s actions. The relevant question, however, is whether an honorary degree carries a distinct meaning of its own, and what Notre Dame’s invitation implies in this regard.

An *honorary law degree* bestowed on a *solemn occasion such as a commencement ceremony* obviously is meant to *honor* someone *in the name of the university*, hence in the name of the ends of education for which the university stands. Father Jenkins’s invitation thus cannot but bear implications—however unintended—with respect to how he thinks these ends are to be understood.

The pertinent fact is that, while recognizing Obama’s achievements and also registering disagreement with respect to what he judges to be Obama’s deficits regarding protection of human life, Father Jenkins went forward with the invitation. This fact itself testifies, even if not altogether deliberately, to a proportionate weighting of the content of these achievements and deficits in relation to the purpose of Notre Dame as a Catholic institution of higher education.

(2) Father Jenkins points toward dialogue as the mediating principle in this weighting. He insists that dialogue on the occasion of the President’s commencement address and degree award would provide adequate testimony to his own personal, and the university’s institutional, disagreement with Obama’s views. On this occasion, the University of Notre Dame, through Father Jenkins, would stress its strong opposition to abortion and embryonic stem-cell research, and in so doing show that its weighting of social-moral issues differed from that of President Obama.

The problem is that Father Jenkins’s appeal to dialogue here overlooks the crucial point: that his invitation to the President already helps define the basic terms and horizon of the intended dialogue. The fact of the invitation itself begins a conversation the terms of which already reflect a proportional ordering of social-moral issues much like that of the President himself.

Not surprisingly, President Obama took the occasion of his commencement address to clarify the nature of this proportional ordering. According to the President, there exists a “seamless garment” of issues that weaves into a “consistent ethic of life,” and this consistent ethic entails that we can judge the significance of any *one* social-moral issue only as proportionately related to *the spectrum of other* social-moral issues. Or at any rate we must do so insofar as we would propose a particular moral position for consideration in the public domain. Only in this way do we arrive at the “common ground” necessary for reasonable human communication. (As President Obama emphasized, we need “open hearts, open minds, and fair-minded words,” noting that this had already led in his case not to changing his position but to telling “my staff to change the words on my Web site.”)

Now one does not need to call into question the saintliness of the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, whose name President Obama invokes, in questioning how the rhetoric of a “seamless garment” of human-ethical issues has often been employed to set “proportionalist” terms and limits for reasonable dialogue in moral matters. Nor, in criticizing a “proportionalist” rendering of a “consistent ethic,” should one deny that all ethical issues have to be engaged as comprehensively as possible.

A “seamless garment” of moral issues, however, can be rightly understood only in terms of the venerable Catholic principle of analogy. According to analogy, the community among these issues exists only simultaneously with what are always their real—even radical—*differences (maior dissimilitudo)*. It is the intrinsic nature of each moral issue that determines the significance of its difference from the others. Thus rudeness and the taking of innocent life are both intrinsically wrong and should both be opposed, but only coincident with recognizing the radical disproportion within the “proportion” implicit in their both being wrong.

*The question I wish to pose to Father Jenkins in this context is simply whether there exists any **unconditional** social-moral good whose gravity is such that its defense would entail a dialogue different from that defended by President Obama—a dialogue, for example, inclusive of the need for what may be termed “witness.”*

Note that “witness” here is not conceived as a counter to reason but rather as the fullest realization of reason. The burden of witness rightly understood, in other words, is not that one is unwilling to dialogue with another, but that the dialogue called for

in given cases demands clarity from the outset regarding the gravity of what is at stake.

A grave unconditional moral good can be properly defended only with the gesture of one's whole being and in the flesh, and only with a reason exercised from inside this more comprehensive testimony.

Indeed, it is reason intrinsically tied to witness in this sense that is the *raison d'être* of any adequately conceived university, especially a Catholic university and especially in our time.

What I mean to suggest, then, is that the most consistently human and Catholic way of dialoguing in the present case would have been for Notre Dame precisely *not* to have invited President Obama, and then if necessary to have provided the pertinent people with a patient explanation of the reasons for the university's *embodied-symbolic witness* (cf. 1 Peter 15) on behalf of what it wished to uphold as an unconditional moral good.

Father Jenkins to be sure would want to affirm unconditional moral goods, and it is not at all my intention to deny this. The point is not that he explicitly espouses a "proportionalist" view of the good—he does not—but that the kind of dialogue presupposed *in the fact* of Notre Dame's inviting and officially honoring President Obama carries just such a "proportionalist" view.

(3) As indicated, President Obama invokes the idea of a "common ground" necessary for genuine dialogue. But the idea of "common ground," rightly understood, has its roots in the common *nature* shared by human beings. Inscribed in the heart of every man is a desire for the good, and this desire implies recognition of the intrinsic good of life in its originally given innocence. No appeal to a ground common to dialogue partners—*however deeply divided these partners may be in their explicit views on important issues*—can reasonably ignore this deeper common nature, and this common restlessness for what is transcendently good, which all human beings share *inside* their differences.

A rightly conceived appeal to a "common ground," in other words, involves bringing to light what lies *naturally in the depths* of every human being, as a necessary condition for realizing an *authentic* common reasonableness.

Dialogue and "common ground" as conceived in the dominant culture, in contrast, are not ordered toward unconditional but only proportionalist "truth." Dialogue tends of its proper logic only toward ever-more dialogue, without inner dynamic for

(possible) conversion to or termination in an unconditional good making an intrinsic demand on all those participating in conversation. Indeed, in the present cultural circumstances, dialogue paradoxically becomes the only good that one cannot reasonably question, and thus the only unconditional good.

The problem with Notre Dame's decision is that it evidences no awareness of a notion of dialogue or common ground different from that of the dominant culture.

(4) We stand now at a time when we can take a long look back at the events of the twentieth century, with its massively brutal taking of innocent human life. We can look back, knowing that we now have at our disposal ever-greater technological capacity for ever-more subtle forms of brutality, especially with respect to human life in its weakest and most vulnerable beginnings.

The lesson of this past century is clear: there are unconditional moral goods whose gravity is such that only a dialogue rooted in witness with one's whole being, in the flesh, suffices.

I do not mean the comparison here to be inflammatory. I nevertheless do mean to ask quite literally whether there is not resident in America's dominant liberal culture a peculiar tendency toward a "compassionate" and "subtle" violence driven by technology that rivals the worst evils of history. "Compassionate": because the violence perpetrated is expressly in the interests of alleviating someone's suffering—to be sure always someone other than the one being terminated. "Subtle": because the violence perpetrated is characteristically against those who cannot exercise the agency of self necessary to claim rights on his or her own behalf—against embryonic human beings, for example, who of their very nature are always "silent" and always "invisible."

And so, again, my question to Father Jenkins: if not this homicidal instrumentalism against the weakest and most vulnerable, then what other intrinsic moral evil, might call for a dialogue not circumscribed by the proportionalism of the dominant culture?

To be sure, addressing the issue raised here is a responsibility scarcely unique to Notre Dame. These are not ordinary times, however, and the University of Notre Dame is not an ordinary institution. The university plays an important role in articulating the reasonable nature of Catholic higher education, not to mention the cultural meaning of Catholicism in America. And it articulates these in a singularly solemn way in its awarding of honorary degrees on the occasion of its commencement.

The unfortunate effect of the university's decision on this occasion is that it leaves the broader culture's proportionalist reason and dialogue fully intact, and indeed reinforces these within the Catholic community.

What the university could and should have done is use the occasion instead to embrace a deeper kind of dialogue and to witness more profoundly in the flesh, on behalf of the weakest of the weak whose inherent dignity we all wish to affirm unconditionally. □

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