



Notre Dame, Farewell

by Fritz Wagner

(I asked my son, a lawyer and theologian, to comment on the Obama appearance at Notre Dame. He replied promptly and his comments are offered nearby.)

We who graduated from Notre Dame have known for many years, but we have hoped against hope, or perhaps more accurately, refused to believe our eyes and ears that Notre Dame has gradually abandoned its fidelity to the Catholic Church and the Faith it claimed to represent.

But yesterday, May 17th, 2009, the evidence became overwhelming. There stood the President of the United States accepting an honorary Doctor of Laws degree while offering the following insights:

1. Faith leads to doubts. (Cardinal Newman was wrong when he wrote in *Grammar of Assent* that 10,000 difficulties do not make a doubt. Bernard Lonergan was wrong to quote Newman in the panel discussion shown on the *Voegelin in Toronto* DVD when he said *difficulties* were in the order of understanding, *doubts* in the order of existence.) These are apparently forgotten distinctions at Notre Dame and unknown to President Obama.

2. We must be tolerant of one another's views. Through goodwill we will come to understand and accept one another or at least live together with mutual respect. (Except that this is not an academic discussion. The recipient of the Notre Dame degree has ordered the funding of overseas abortions, the resumption of tax payer funded embryonic stem cell research, and in general has done all in his power to advance the program of the abortionists, what Daniel Henninger has called the sacramental foundation of the democrat party.)

But this was known before yesterday. What wasn't clear to me or to others until yesterday was the following:

1. The students and faculty LOVED Obama. They were a worshipful assembly, hanging on, and even anticipating, every word he spoke. He played them, flattered them, with consummate skill. Telling them how working in the Chicago slums he came to meet religious people and consequently joined a church, how the Reverend Theodore M Hesburgh, President of Notre Dame for 35 years, single handedly brought about the consent and agreement that led to the Civil Rights Act, how Obama

would be happy to play intramural basketball at Notre Dame if one of the teams could use a 6'2" forward. I was mightily impressed. When did I last see a recorded image of so effective a public orator. Was it Adolf Hitler at the Sportspalast? Probably. There was a *frisson* in the Notre Dame sports palace and one half-expected a stray distant "Heil!" in a quiet moment.

2. Then there were the University Spokesmen. There was the master of ceremonies, the University Provost, Thomas Burish, former Washington and Lee president, chosen by the board of trustees in 2005 to speak for the university. His silver hair and aquiline nose, thin wide lips and flared nostrils were the spitting image of the bust in the Cleveland museum of the Roman Proconsul of Egypt. That image was handsome and implacable. Above all, implacable. On the television we didn't hear him but we didn't need to hear him to see him succeed in his function of speaking power and assurance to the uncertain and of perhaps keeping in line the unruly.

Then there was the professor of sociology, a Richard Williams, bearded with twinkling eye and effusive manner, from whose mouth came this smarmy slight of hand: "When our students undertake community welfare projects I don't ask them whether they are pro-life or pro-choice."

This brings to my mind Josef Conrad's "The Horror! The Horror!" but not from the *Heart of Darkness* but from Notre Dame du Lac, where the memories of great Catholic scholars now dead are besmirched: Joseph Evans, Ernest Sandeen, Gerhardt Niemeyer, Stanley Parry to name but four I knew.

And the glib Reverend John Jenkins, expert fast quipper, assures all that all is as it ought to be in fulfillment of the Hesburgh promise for that broad happy upland that will be the best of all possible worlds. And the great man himself, in his day as charismatic as Obama, took a standing ovation. Still handsome, though his purplish mien was that of a man awaiting his end in a hospice. The Hesburgh who:

1. Took the Ford Foundation Grant in the early '60's on condition that he de-Christianize the liberal arts college.
2. Organized and led the 1967 Land-o-Lakes conference of Catholic college and university presidents when they agreed to defy the Church on its mandates for Catholic education.
3. Claimed throughout his career that he was doing all in the service of "Our Lady" when in truth he was possessed by an astonishing eros for power (to borrow James Rhodes's terminology) that led him to seek positions in such diverse arenas as the

International Atomic Energy Commission and the Board of Directors of David Rockefeller's Chase Manhattan Bank.

And when Mary Ann Glendon, distinguished Harvard Professor of Law, former ambassador to the Vatican and distinguished Catholic laywoman, declined the Laetare Medal to avoid giving legitimacy to the Obama Doctorate, she was "replaced" at the last moment by retired 9th Circuit Court of Appeals judge John T. Noonan, a dissident liberal Catholic who, when he taught me at the Notre Dame law school, informed me that Eric Voegelin's view of history was simplistic (I admit he was reacting to my jejune account, not to Voegelin's own texts.)

Far more important to Catholics in the United States is what took place away from the graduation ceremonies.

Archbishop (Emeritus) Adam Maida of Detroit was leading a prayer vigil in the grotto at Notre Dame (modeled after the Grotto at Lourdes). Archbishop Raymond Burke, formerly of St. Louis and now of the Vatican office of the Papal Signatura bemoaned the actions of Notre Dame, as did Cardinal George of Chicago. The bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend, John M. D'Arcy, refused to attend the graduation for the first time in some 22 years of his episcopacy. (I wrote to him but he had already had 3000 emails and probably wasn't reading them any more. I had suggested to him he had the choice of being seen as a fringe kook or being cast in the role of a Pontius Pilot. I suppose he preferred the latter.) He did try to persuade Fr. Jenkins to withdraw his degree offer. He tried a number of times by letter and by phone.

Father Frank Pavone, leader of the national organization, *Priests for Life*, also prayed at Notre Dame. Over successive days people carrying images of the Blessed Virgin were arrested for parading on campus without a permit. The TV cameras caught the arrest of a kneeling octogenarian priest, feeble and trembling, being lifted and taken away by beefy policemen, some of whom were likely the sons of Polish-American Catholics.

I watched all this unfold for two hours live on Fox Cable News, with narration by Chris Wallace, a kind and gentle son of Mike Wallace, who was not. Wallace did not understand the main issue or if he did he did not press it.

The main issue is whether the University of Notre Dame is subordinate to the directives of the bishop of its diocese and whether the directive of the National Council of Catholic Bishops against awarding degrees to men or women who oppose fundamental Catholic moral teaching is binding on Notre Dame.

A priest friend graced our table at dinner last night. I asked him what it all meant. He said it meant that the US bishops (70 had condemned the Notre Dame action) had been shown to have lost their authority over the laity and the Catholic education system. They were afraid to sanction politicians who promoted abortion. Their powers of excommunication, interdiction, etc., atrophied through never being given credible use. But above all, they wanted to be accepted as good Americans and not condemned as fringe types unfit to dine with the leaders of wealth and power.

My powers of observation are ordinary; my powers of analysis work best in an unchallenged vacuum; and my powers of predicting the future are somewhere near a coin toss. I hope and pray that I am wrong in all the foregoing and that my harsh judgments of people are wrong and if so I might be given the chance to make amends. ✎

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