

Notre Dame's False Civility at the Cost of Truth

by Father Raymond J. DeSouza

Poor Father John Jenkins, president of the University of Notre Dame. Just a few weeks before Vice President Joe Biden and former Speaker of the House John Boehner were to come to South Bend to be honored for their purported contribution to a civil and constructive politics, where disagreements do not lead to demonization, Boehner struck a rather off-key note in his characterization of Ted Cruz as "Lucifer in the flesh." Boehner is personally opposed to incivility in politics but does not impose that view on himself.

Father Jenkins had a problem. Time was growing short. How could Notre Dame honor Biden before he left office? After all, Biden is the most senior pro-choice Catholic in the history of the United States, and for decades Notre Dame has given its honors to such public figures. Yet, in 2016, things were not as simple as they used to be for Father Jenkins' predecessors. It is more complex today. Hence, the decision to award the Laetare Medal — modestly styled by Notre Dame itself as the "most prestigious award given to American Catholics" — jointly to Biden and Boehner. Biden would get his honor, and the pro-life Boehner would provide cover.

For most of the 40-plus years since *Roe v. Wade*, Notre Dame has chosen to employ its considerable prestige to provide cover for Catholic politicians who support the abortion license. Notre Dame itself is not in favor of abortion — Father Jenkins started going to the March for Life in 2010, after the 2009 commencement mess — but it has been consistently and intensely on the side of prominent Catholics in public office who are pro-choice. Everyone remembers 2009, when President Barack Obama served as commencement speaker and was given an honorary doctorate of laws. The explosion in the Catholic world — 70 U.S. bishops publicly protested — took Father Jenkins aback. The refusal that year of Mary Ann Glendon, arguably the most accomplished Catholic laywoman in America, of the Laetare Medal was momentous. Father Jenkins had hoped to use Glendon's sterling pro-life credentials to cover for Obama's aggressive support of abortion. Glendon, made of rather sterner stuff than Boehner, would not be so manipulated. By 2009, things had changed, and significantly so, which I detailed in a story for the *Register* then ("No, Notre Dame").

In 1984, when Cardinal John O'Connor of New York said that then vice-presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro's pro-choice position was inconsistent with her Catholic faith, Notre Dame rushed to her defense. With then-president Father Theodore Hesburgh at his side, Gov. Mario Cuomo of New York was granted Notre Dame as the venue for articulating the "personally opposed" but-publicly-pro-choice position that is now standard.

In 1992, when President George H.W. Bush was the commencement speaker during an election year, Father Munk Molloy, Father Hesburgh's successor, had to somehow counter Bush's pro-life position. He gave the Laetare Medal that year to Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York, a staunch pro-choice Catholic. But Father Molloy got significant private criticism from the American hierarchy, such that he elected not to invite President Bill Clinton to Notre Dame's commencement during his term. The Obama invitation and the Glendon refusal changed the reality at Notre Dame. Biden had risen higher — in terms of titular office, not intellectual acuity or actual achievement — than either Cuomo or Moynihan. His long abortion record, if not celebrated by Notre Dame, might lead some to question whether Notre Dame's administration had cooled on providing cover for pro-choice Catholic politicians.

What to do? Father Jenkins could wait, to see if calm would return after the Obama debacle. But things only got worse. Obama had promised in his 2009 commencement address that, while he disagreed with the pro-life position itself, there were areas of common ground, such as conscience protection. That turned out to be a lie, with Obama and Biden using the health-care mandates to violate the religious liberty of Catholic entities — including Notre Dame and the Little Sisters of the Poor. Then Biden led the Obama administration's push for same-sex "marriage." There was no more time to wait. But the Catholic world was not as deferential to Notre Dame as it had been back in 1984 or 1992. Giving Biden an honorary degree and stand-alone commencement speaker slot would be a step too far. So Father Jenkins decided to honor both Biden and Boehner, wrapping the whole affair in the language of civility.

While officially noting that "while both have been loyal and committed partisans, they were leaders who put the good of the nation ahead of partisan victory, seeking through respectful dialogue honorable compromise and progress," Notre Dame would know that it had kept faith with Father Hesburgh's legacy of celebrating pro-choice Catholics. Some observers have argued that the awarding of the Laetare Medal this year means that Notre Dame is returning to old form with new vigor and that the muted reaction to the Biden choice is the difference between the

ethos of the pontificates of John Paul II/Benedict XVI and Francis. Perhaps; and Father Jenkins has commented that the sight of Pope Francis addressing Congress last September, with Biden and Boehner seated behind him, inspired this year's Laetare choice. Yet it is more likely that Notre Dame was chastened by the fracas of 2009, stung that the Catholic world did not accept its benediction for Obama. The Biden-Boehner choice is a "settling for the best that can be achieved." The ostensible grounds for the choice, to promote civility, is so transparently false as to indicate that the real reason needs to be shrouded, not celebrated.

Biden's principal accomplishment is his longevity in politics, but his most lasting contribution to public life was his chairmanship of the Senate Judiciary Committee during the confirmation hearings for Supreme Court nominees Robert Bork and Clarence Thomas. It was the former that so advanced the "politics of personal destruction," as it would later be called, that a new verb entered America's political lexicon: "to Bork," meaning to destroy by scurrilous means a political rival. There are no shortage of politicians who have contributed to the lack of civility in politics, but Biden has a legacy there far greater than most. That Father Jenkins would try to hang the Laetare Medal on that fraudulent hook is the measure of his desperation.

The Biden-Boehner Laetare is more of a whispered, rather than a full-throated, profession of Notre Dame's pro-choice creed. Father Jenkins did what Notre Dame simply had to do to fete Biden on campus as the clock ticks down on his White House years. And come November, should Hillary Clinton be elected president, then Father Jenkins will have to decide whether he will make amends for Notre Dame's lack of celebratory hospitality for the Clintons in the 1990s. If so, as is likely the case, the whispers will be over, and the shouting will begin again.

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