

## Golden Dome Dustup

Ken Briggs | May. 13, 2009 NCR Today

The ruckus over President Obama's invitation to Notre Dame's graduation is most obviously about abortion. In that sense it's a quarrel within the Catholic Church over how to treat those who differ from Catholic teaching.

But I believe there is a subplot that springs from academic politics. My instincts tell me that this might be a strategy to boost Notre Dame's reputation as a research university.

The scenario I've envisioned goes like this.

For a long time, Notre Dame has prided itself as a high quality undergraduate institution, but its status as a research university has lagged behind. A bold initiative is trying to remedy that gap. Nothing short of a niche in that competitive madhouse assigned to the elitist universities will do.

Hovering over this march to the front, however, is a cloud of uncertainty over whether Notre Dame's Catholicism permits genuinely uncensored research. The doubts may be unfounded, but they linger.

The Catholic right could be seen as a particularly nettlesome obstacle to removing these doubts. The right trades in moral absolutes that, however justified, send shudders through the "respectable" academic community to the point where they pose a threat to Notre Dame's aspirations to join that largely secular but "prestigious" community.

As I see it, Notre Dame's invitation to Obama represented a yearning to jettison the Catholic right in hopes of proving that it could be as independent of churches as any other high level school. Maybe it was conscious, maybe not. But it seems to have accomplished that purpose. The Catholic right, which has long accused Notre Dame of whittling away its Catholic identity, predictably became enraged and has largely written the school off. That may well have suited Notre Dame just fine. The likes of Princeton and Chicago could be imagined nodding their approval.

After all, it's probably safe to say that most parents of the students and alumni are Catholic moderates who would also welcome the Obama visit. The university therefore stood to win applause from both the snooty academics from the outsider and most of their own constituents. A smart move.

Another signal of Notre Dame's independence to those who wonder about its academic freedom was its defiance of the Catholic bishops. I cannot recall a single move by any Catholic institution that so exposed the bishops' powerlessness and so wounded their credibility. Despite their protests, the university did as it pleased and the bishops could do nothing.

Perhaps I've got all this wrong and such considerations never came up, but I'm assuming they did. When it comes to public relations, Notre Dame is second to none. It practices a politics of its own which may be a lasting legacy of Irish ward heelers. What has happened with the Obama invitation could turn out to be a brilliant strategy for self promotion. The recent trouble is often portrayed as crowds of angry protesters against

the beleaguered president. In reality, I think the president holds the cards that Notre Dame is counting on to build its future.

Just don't make plans for any other highly visible pro choice figures to be feted at Notre Dame. It could be time to close ranks and reestablish "Catholic identity" with renewed fervor.

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