

An 'A' for Obama

Joe Feuerherd | May. 18, 2009 NCR Today

Writing over at [America Magazine's blog](#)^[1], Michael Sean Winters gives President a 'C-minus' for his Notre Dame address.

Writes Winters: "Those of us Catholics who have supported President Obama and defended his being awarded this honorary degree hoped the speech would set the stage for a rapprochement with the Catholic hierarchy, if not with Catholic Republicans who have no interest in seeing a good relationship between the President and the leaders of the Catholic Church develop." Obama, Winters repeats, "failed to find the language and the logic that might have laid the foundation for building a better relationship with the Catholic hierarchy."

Winters is grading the wrong exam. Obama's test had little to do with placating the US bishops many of whom, sadly, appear beyond dialogue and engagement. Rather, the president's task was straightforward: Transcend the brouhaha over his appearance at Notre Dame and speak directly and sympathetically to the concerns of American Catholics, particularly those generally supportive of his programs but uneasy over his pro-choice stance.

Here, the president deserves an 'A'.

Obama's recollection of his days as a Catholic-sponsored community organizer, his deference to "Father Ted" and "Father John," his skillful invocation of Cardinal Bernardin's legacy, and his call to disagree without demonizing will redound to his political benefit especially among the millions of viewers who focused for the first time yesterday on the issues surrounding his Notre Dame appearance.

The president should be grateful to those not only bishops but also extremists like the Cardinal Newman Society and anti-abortion wingnut Randall Terry who provided drama to what otherwise could have been another humdrum commencement address. As headlines across the nation demonstrate ("President Calls for Truce on Abortion" reads today's page one *Kansas City Star*, "Obama on Abortion Furor: Seek 'Common Ground'" says the *Chicago Tribune*), critics of President Obama appear oddly out-of-it. By contrast, the president appeared well, presidential.

Remind me again, one imagines John Q. Catholic asking, Why did anyone oppose the President of the United States speaking at a Catholic campus and calling for programs to reduce the number of abortions?

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[1] http://www.americamagazine.org/blog/entry.cfm?blog_id=2&id=28452923-3048-741E-7282751823625667