

It was a 'face-up-to-the-life-you-have-just-inherited' speech

Joan Chittister | May. 18, 2009 From Where I Stand

Yes, I know, I know. At least according to the media and the anti-abortion movement, President Obama's presence at Notre Dame University in South Bend, Indiana as graduation speaker and recipient of an honorary degree, was all about abortion. Except that it wasn't.

The speech was not about abortion at all. It was about lots of Catholic things -- if Catholics will only remember them -- but it was not about the morality or ultimate moral meaning of abortion at all. It was, in fact, more about the model of a Jesus who could talk to Roman soldiers and Samaritan women, to Pharisees and to adulterers with respect and with care. It was a recall of the Jesus who refused to condemn either the Roman emperor or his soldiers. It was also a call, at least indirectly, to the next generation to "put down their swords," to stop calling their opposite numbers -- those who seek to make abortion unnecessary than to criminalize it -- "murderers" and to listen to one another.

No small graduation speech.

Obama identified this year's Notre Dame graduates with a generation that must negotiate a global panoply of differences, a crossroads in time in need of lighthouses of faith to enable all of us to find our way.

Essential to the process, Obama insisted, was the willingness not to demonize those who hold faith-based positions different from ours, to realize their own sincerity, to take their positions as seriously as our own.

The speech was a breath of fresh air after living through an administration that fed on -- thrived on -- enemies and hate, that practiced ruthless partisanship in a pluralistic society, that chose party politics over the common needs of the country, that talked about "new crusades" and "terrorists" rather than attempt to relate to the needs and frustrations and ideals of peoples from whom such violence emerged, that chose ill-designed wars over the alliances necessary to marginalize such extremists even from their own.

Obama's speech was, in fact, far more than the standard-brand graduation rhetoric. It didn't extol aphorisms or meander down the Brady Bunch memory lane. It was not a feel-good speech. It was a "face-up-to-the-life-you-have-just-inherited" speech.

It was a call not only to this year's graduates but to all of those who have preceded them intent more on winning than on working things out.

It was a call to adults to stop acting like sophomores in the name of faith. It was a cry to those on both sides of every issue to refuse to suppress complexity in a global, interfaith world. It was an attempt to move beyond force, beyond the denunciation of those who are just as committed to resolving problems as we are without making outlaws of those for whom the issue cannot wait for long-term answers.

It was, most of all, a very Catholic speech.

It deals with issues that have been a Catholic agenda for over 100 years of social justice encyclicals.

Obama asked graduates to see themselves as responsible for the global good as well as for their own success. He challenged them to go beyond the commitment to personal advantage to global good. He taught them that the zero-sum game, the notion that for me to win everyone else must lose, only means that everyone else will lose, and I, too, eventually. How can anyone in that audience who just went through an economic meltdown driven by greed which eventually brought the entire country down, doubt the value of those words, of that kind of commitment to a pro-life agenda.

He asked them, as an article of faith, to recognize the value of self-doubt that leads us to forego our own self-righteousness and inspires us to learn to listen to the wisdom of those around us.

He called them not to revel in the grandeur of their degrees from an isolated perspective but to remain open to the rest of the world. He called them to live their ideals but to resist the attempt to force them onto others.

He taught them to gain their hope from what has already been done in the past, what we as a people have already worked through and achieved, already overcome as a people together like the oppression of a king, the disregard for civil rights, the exploitation of laborers, the enslavement of a people, the struggle for animal rights, the recognition of women's equality, the movement beyond racism. It was, indeed, a very Catholic speech.

From where I stand, the struggle at Notre Dame to maintain a civil dialogue despite a difference in faith perspectives was another step in Catholic growth. We spoke clearly for the sacredness of life, yes, but we were also called not to leave any part of life out of our search for its sacredness.

Seventy out of 450 bishops criticized the presence of President Obama at a Notre Dame graduation and they denied the value of it. But the President did not. Instead, he modeled his own commitment to engage the country in common cause rather than divide it into mutually disrespectful camps. In the process, he may well have taught every bit as much about the gospel and total respect for life as the bishops did. For the sake of the growth and impact of the church, I hope so.

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