

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

May 22, 2009 at 12:17pm

The numbers game

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NCR Today

Estimating crowd numbers is a tricky game -- which is why many journalists leave it to organizers of events or security people. In all the coverage of the University of Notre Dame's graduation, there were lots of numbers bandied about: 2,900 graduates, 12,000 inside the arena listening to Obama's speech, 100-300 protesters outside the campus, 20-30 students who skipped commencement. On these, most of the media covering the controversial commencement agreed.

But how many people attended the alternative, on-campus event? The mainstream media said hundreds, while the Catholic media (and prolife bloggers) said thousands. Quite a discrepancy.

Like many of the media who received press credentials to cover Obama's speech, I was required to check in and go through security by noon for the 2 p.m. graduation. This gave me only an hour or so to stop by the off-campus protest and to interview some students before the ceremony. So I did what any reporter would do: I asked other people about the event I had missed. A reporter from NPR, a security guy at the grotto and a protester I met later all said there were hundreds at the alternative event.

So were the Catholic media exaggerating -- or repeating exaggerations of prolife organizers when they said 3,000? Or were the Associated Press and even Fox News downplaying the numbers when they said "hundreds"?

Not so quick with the conspiracy theory.

Turns out they were describing different parts of the elephant. Those who publicly protested Obama's appearance fell into three camps: 1) those accompanying the graphic signs on Michigan Street and Angela Boulevard just outside of campus; 2) those who attended the alternative "graduation" and prayer service at

the grotto; and 3) those who attended an open-air Mass and rally on South Quad.

There were about 100-300 outside the school, about 200 at the grotto, but 2,500-3,000 at the Mass and rally, according to an unofficial spokesperson at the university who stopped by all three events. They included graduates, parents and students, but also outside visitors who came to "witness."

I don't think there was any maliciousness on the part of media who reported only "hundreds" at the rally. Either they were inside the Joyce Center, like me, or they went to the grotto and missed the earlier Mass. Either way, there were more people "protesting" -- whether with signs or prayers--than reported in many press outlets.

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