

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

June 8, 2009 at 11:07am

The silence of the presidents

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

Fr. Thomas Reese, S.J., former editor-in-chief of *America* magazine, wrote an exceedingly **important article** for the *National Catholic Reporter*, May 29, on the silence of the presidents of Catholic colleges and universities.

Almost none of them came to the defense of the University of Notre Dame or their fellow president, Holy Cross Father John Jenkins, when the institution and Jenkins were under heavy fire from bishops and conservative laity alike for having invited President Barack Obama to be Notre Dame's Commencement speaker and to receive an honorary degree.

Reese, alluding to a famous line in one of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries, referred to their collective silence as the case of the dog that did not bark.

He called it a surprising development because this one group of Catholic college and university presidents (many of whom, alas, are Reese's fellow Jesuits) knows more about Catholic higher education than any other group and has more at stake than most.

And yet, Reese observed, the presidents were AWOL during the entire controversy. The Catholic college and university presidents were silent.

Yes, a couple did speak, he conceded, such as Trinity College President Patricia McGuire. Georgetown University President Jack DiGioia also showed solidarity by allowing President Obama to speak on campus. But most were silent.

Reese offered four theories for the silence and found none of them finally persuasive.

Theory #1: Perhaps the presidents agreed that the invitation and honorary degree were a mistake. ?Considering the number of Catholic institutions that have been attacked for their speakers and degree recipients by the Cardinal Newman Society,? he wrote, ?I doubt this explanation. If presidents are not for academic freedom and autonomy, who will be??

Theory #2: The presidents actually took some pleasure in Notre Dame?s predicament. ?After hearing it so often touted as the premier Catholic university that was truly Catholic, they were not at all unhappy to see it get its comeuppance.? But, as he pointed out, ?such pettiness would not blind them to the stakes that were in play in this dispute.?

Theory #3: The presidents did not want to anger their own bishops in a fight that had no local ramifications. ?In this case,? he observed, ?the presidents do not agree with Benjamin Franklin who told the Continental Congress, ?We must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately??.?

Their motto seems to be, by way of contrast to Franklin?s, ?keep your heads down, avoid conflict, let sleeping bishops lie.?

Theory #4: The presidents did not want to anger the bishops as a whole, particularly since they are in continuing negotiations with the bishops over the interpretation and implementation of Pope John Paul II?s *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, the 1990 apostolic exhortation on Catholic higher education.

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This fourth theory, he pointed out, ?simply recognizes that trying to organize academics is like trying to herd cats. College and university presidents rarely act or speak as a group, except when they lobby for government money.?

However, he argued, these presidents are ?supposed to be leaders experienced in organizing people for a common purpose.?

?Whatever the cause of this presidential silence,? he concluded, ?it was shameful. The presidents owe Notre Dame and Fr. Jenkins an apology; they owe Catholic higher education better leadership; they owe their faculties an explanation for not defending academic freedom and autonomy. They stood silent while another educational institution was unfairly and viciously attacked.?

?The next time when their institution is under attack, they should not be surprised when no one comes to their defense. Benjamin Franklin was right.?

The same can be said about the majority of U.S. Catholic bishops who remained silent (as they did in the two previous presidential elections) while a growing minority of bishops spoke and acted in direct violation of the Conference?s own teachings and policies, reaffirmed every four years, and most recently in November, 2007.

The bishops have made it clear that they embrace the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin?s ?consis-tent-ethic-of-life? approach to moral issues; that although abortion is a major life issue, it is not the only one; and that they do not presume to tell Catholic voters *for* whom to vote or *against* whom to vote.

By contrast, the 70-odd bishops believe that abortion ?trumps? (their favorite verb) all other life issues,

whether war, capital punishment, governmental obligations to the poor, health care, immigration, or torture.

They also believe that it is right to tell Catholics for whom *not* to vote.

The reality is that relatively few Catholics are listening to the bishops anymore: neither the militant minority *nor* the silent majority.

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