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The Meaning of Public Relations -- Notre Dame Style

Ken Briggs | Dec. 6, 2009 NCR Today

The University of Notre Dame has attracted magnified, national attention twice this year.

The first was sparked by its decision to award President Obama an honorary degree. A fierce debate ensued between supporters of the decision and protesters who argued that Obama's pro-choice position on abortion should have made him ineligible.

The second cause has been triggered by the dismal performance of the football team and the subsequent firing of coach Charlie Weis. The school has moved on this issue with a kind of delicacy one might expect of a bomb squad in action.

The Obama controversy got nasty, and has repercussions. In certain respects I think it was a political move to demonstrate a type of broadmindedness that would appeal both to the Catholic mainstream and to American public's sense of toleration, real or not. But whatever the motives on either side, it was unmistakably a legitimate religious moral debate.

The football brouhaha stems from the opposite source, a slavish devotion to society's hunger for money and prestige. The old chestnuts about Notre Dame battling for the honor of beleaguered European immigrants have may live in fantasy but certainly not fact. Its graduates have long been the establishment which often uses newer immigrants for its own purposes.

No, football is about money and about being big shots. When school officials speak piously about how football exists at the center of university life, therefore, the objects of worship become distressingly clear. A Catholic university can shell out $18 million bucks to get rid of a coach. Such a figure consitutes a big chuck of the entire endowment of many small Catholic colleges. You don't share money or prestige.

Obviously Notre Dame's desperation to keep its television contracts and "reputation" is part of a much broader distortion of values. Big time college sports has become increasingly corrupt, driven by the same self-centered goals. What sets apart Notre Dame is its pretense of standing above that crass fray, as if the effects of big time college sports could somehow be contained or enfolded within the bigger tent of Christianity.

Sports has its place in Division III schools, mostly, where it doesn't make a profit, where players have fun and where they don't occupy the core values of the university.

It matters, of course, where the moral tone of a university is established. Most universities become captive to society's economic and egotistical drives. Maybe there's nothing that can or should be done about that. If that is the case, however, it should at the very least be noted.

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