
From: William Dempsey [mailto:whdempsey@earthlink.net]
Sent: Thursday, September 17, 2009 3:55 PM
To: William H. Dempsey
Subject: On Fr. Jenkins's Pro-Life Announcement

A number of you have asked what I think of the message Fr. Jenkins broadcast yesterday about the measures he has taken respecting the abortion and stem cell research issues. (I attach his statement for any of you who have not received it.) I have tried responding individually and sometimes briefly (and I know unsatisfactorily), but the inquiries have mounted and I do not feel comfortable deferring a reasonably comprehensive response. Accordingly, I will tell you collectively what I think at this point for whatever it may be worth. I emphasize that I do not speak for Sycamore Trust, but only for myself -- we have not had time to deliberate collectively -- and also that I may modify my views as I learn more.

It is a natural reaction, given the bleak history of ND on the abortion and stem cell issues, to welcome and praise Fr. Jenkins's message, and a case can be made that it is reasonable to do so. I will not make that case here. I do not find it persuasive at this point even if arguable. This is why:

This move is obviously a reaction to the backlash over the Obama incident. Surely it would not have been undertaken otherwise. In these circumstances, one ought examine the project with care to judge whether it is more of a damage control measure without deep roots than a reflection of what would be a dramatic course change by the University.

Certainly Fr. Jenkins's commitment to lead the ND contingent at the March for Life is praiseworthy. It seems to me that it is really the obligation of a priest/President of Notre Dame, but the depressing fact is that it has never been done before. Father Jenkins deserves thanks.

But that is a one-time affair. The rest is not heartening. The most troubling sign is the obviously deliberate exclusion from Task Force membership of anyone associated with the ND organizations that have been unashamedly and actively pro-life: the Center for Ethics & Culture and the ND Fund for the Protection of Human Life. Nor was the student representative chosen from the leadership of the student RTL organization or from anyone active in last year's student alliance protesting the honoring of the President, ND Response. It is hard to resist the inference that this is as a move toward marginalizing the Center and the Fund, neither of which receives any University support the way it is.

This is no reflection on those who have been appointed. Insofar as I know of them, they are worthy appointees, able and pro-life. But that does not erase the implication of the exclusion of all representatives of the existing centers of pro-life activities.

The next troublesome element is the specified agenda as it stands so far. Surely it is no accident, though it is to me surprising, that the listed subjects the committee is working on are identical with the agenda given in his speech by President Obama.

Here is what Obama proposed and Fr. Jenkins lists for study:

1. Obama: "Let's make adoption more available." Jenkins: "the best policies for facilitating adoption."
2. Obama: "a sensible conscience clause." Jenkins: "a reasonable conscience clause."
3. Obama: "care and support for women who do carry their children to term." Jenkins: "the most effective ways to support pregnant women."

That's the full list so far for ND. Obama had one more: birth control. As he phrased it: "So let us work together to reduce the number of women seeking abortions, let's reduce unintended pregnancies. (Applause.)" Note the applause. One trusts neither Father Jenkins nor anyone else understood what the President was saying.

This is an agenda that any secular university could adopt to advance the goal of political accommodation. It is an agenda that pro-choice Catholics can embrace. It does not go to the issue as to which the Catholic Church stands against Obama and the pro-choice and pro-abortion forces: the fundamental and grave immorality of abortion. It is an agenda, to put it perhaps more relevantly, that a faculty ranging from indifferent to hostile to the Church's position will likely not mind.

Here is something many might mind but that ought to be first and foremost for a Catholic university: education. ND students, according to survey results, fall away from the Church's teaching on abortion in large numbers during four years at ND. And why not? There is no instruction, except for the handful who elect it, on that teaching. On another front, ND could, for instance, engage in stem cell research. Initiatives like these are proper to a university, and are sorely missed at ND. But these measures would be controversial. They would mark ND as unashamedly pro-life and as doing something that only ND can do, educate and inspire its students.

It has occurred to me also to wonder what Notre Dame can bring to these issues in better fashion than those who have been working on them for years. On the face of it, at least, they seem to be at heart legislative issues to be handled by those charged with, and having the competence to deal with, these questions. We may learn more about that in time; but as we all know the appointment of a committee often signals the end, rather than the beginning, of action.

Finally, it is unsettling but instructive that this announcement comes a day after Fr. Jenkins's annual address to the faculty in which he described his goals for the year, which included increasing female and minority faculty representation but not a word about the most crucial problem facing the university, the loss of Catholic identity through the failure to hire enough Catholics to restore the predominance required by the Mission Statement. This is a striking falling away from his wonderful inaugural address. The fact that ND did nothing to serve the pro-life cause until forced by the reaction to the Obama incident testifies to the fact that, without a predominance of committed Catholics on the faculty, any pro-life efforts launched under pressure will in time fade away. The risk, and surely it is real, is that this new initiative and the publicity ND is generating about it will deflect attention from the fundamental problem besetting Notre Dame.

Of course this may all turn out brilliantly in the end. Fr. Jenkins may somehow bring about a major change in hiring policy even while setting manifestly inadequate targets and while stressing the need to hire more women and more minorities; the Task Force may turn its attention to the moral issue at the heart of the abortion and embryonic stem cell controversies and proper to a university; it may recommend, and the Administration may adopt, measures in support of the Fund and the Center, or they may thrive even while being cut out. But I return to where I began: A project that deliberately excludes from participation those who have courageously manned organizations standing against the prevailing faculty attitude toward the pro-life cause ought be regarded with utmost suspicion.

Bill

[Link to Father Jenkins's letter.](#)