

“A Notre Dame Witness for Life”

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Notre Dame Center for Ethics and Culture

<http://ethicscenter.nd.edu/>

The Notre Dame Fund to Protect Human Life

<http://ethicscenter.nd.edu/lifefund.shtml>

Good evening.

It is an honor to be with you on this campus. It is a joy to be here under the auspices of Notre Dame’s Center for Ethics and Culture – and the Notre Dame Fund for the Protection of Human Life. This date has a special resonance for me: 13 years ago today, in a hotel room in a far part of the world, Chinese officials put a beautiful baby girl in my wife’s arms – and I became a father.

The precipitate cause of our gathering tonight is the honor and platform our university has extended to a

President whose policies reflect clear convictions about unborn life, and about the value the law ought to place on protecting that life. These convictions are not in doubt. In July 2007, the candidate spelled them out in a forceful address to a Planned Parenthood convention in our nation's capital.

Before that audience, he declared that a woman's "fundamental right" to an abortion was at stake in the coming election. He spoke about how he had "put Roe at the center" of his "lesson plan on reproductive freedom" when he was a professor – and how he would put it at the center of his agenda as president. He invoked his record in the Illinois state senate, where he fought restrictions on abortion, famously including one on partial-birth abortion. He said that the "first thing" he wanted to do as President was to "sign a Freedom of Choice Act." And he ended by assuring his audience that "on this fundamental issue," he, like they, would never yield.

These were his promises as a candidate. His actions as President – his key appointments, his judicial nominees, his lifting of restrictions on federal funding for abortion providers overseas, the green light given to the destruction of human embryos for research, his targeting of “conscience clause” protections for healthcare workers – all these actions are fully consistent with his promises. It is precisely this terrible consistency that makes it so dispiriting to see our university extend to this man her most public platform and an honorary doctorate of laws. There are good men and women working for an America where every child is welcomed in life and protected by law – and when they lift their eyes to Notre Dame, they ought to find inspiration.

So tonight our hearts carry a great sadness. But we do not come here this evening to rally against a speaker. We come to affirm the sacredness of life. And we come with a great hope: That a university founded under the patronage of Our Lady might be as

consistent in the defense of her principles as the President of the United States has been for advancing his. In a nation wounded by Roe ... in a society that sets mothers against the children they carry in their wombs ... we come here tonight because however much our hearts ache, they tell us this: Our church, our country, and our culture long for the life witness of Notre Dame.

What does it mean to be a witness? To be a witness, an institution must order itself so that all who look upon it see a consonance between its most profound truths and its most public actions. For a Catholic university in the 21st century, this requires that those placed in her most critical leadership positions – on the faculty, in the administration, on the board of trustees – share that mission. We must concede there is no guarantee that the young men and women who come here to learn will assent to her witness – but we must never forget that the university will have failed them if they leave here without at least

understanding it. That is what it means to be a witness.

This witness is the only real reason for a University of Notre Dame. We believe that there are self-evident truths about the dignity of each human life, and that this dignity derives from our having been fashioned in our Creator's likeness. In this new century, these beliefs make us the counterculture. One does not need to be a Catholic to appreciate that abortion involves the brutal taking of innocent human life. To argue that this is a Catholic truth, or even a religious truth, is to overlook what science and sonograms tell us – and to insult the Protestants, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and, yes, even some atheists, who appreciate that a civilization which sanctions abortion as a human right is in some essential way writing its death warrant.

Over the years, the whole idea of truth – much less our ability to know it – has been rendered doubtful by

the slow advance of a soft agnosticism that has itself become orthodoxy at so many universities. Not so at Notre Dame. All across this wondrous campus, we pass imagery that sings to us about the hope born of a Jewish woman in a Bethlehem stable. Yet we kid ourselves if we believe these images are self-sustaining. Without a witness that keeps these signposts alive, our crosses, statues, and stained-glass windows will ultimately fade into historical curiosities like the “Christo et ecclesiae” that survives to this day on buildings around Harvard Yard and the seal that still validates every Harvard degree.

For most of her life, Notre Dame has served as a symbol of a Catholic community struggling to find acceptance in America – and yearning to make our own contributions to this great experiment in ordered liberty. We identify with those who are poor and downtrodden and on the margins of acceptance because that is where the Gospel points – and

because we remember whence came our own parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents.

If we are honest, however, we must admit that in many ways we – and the university that nurtured us – are now the rich and powerful and privileged ourselves. This is a form of success, and we need not be embarrassed by it. But we must be mindful of the greater responsibilities that come with this success.

For years this university has trumpeted her lay governance. So what does it say about the Notre Dame brand of leadership, that in the midst of a national debate over a decision that speaks to our Catholic identity, a debate in which thousands of people across the country are standing up to declare themselves “yea” or “nay,” our trustees and fellows – the men and women who bear ultimate responsibility for this decision – remain as silent as Trappist monks? At a time when we are told to “engage” and

hold “dialogue,” their timidity thunders across this campus. And what will history say of our billions in endowment if the richest Catholic university America has ever known cannot find it within herself to mount a public and spirited defense of the most defenseless among us?

In the past few weeks, we have read more than once the suggestion that to oppose this year’s speaker and honorary degree is to elevate politics over the proper work of a university. In many ways, we might say that such reasoning lies at the core of the confusion. As has become clear with America’s debates over the destruction of embryos for scientific research, over human cloning, over assisted suicide, and over other end-of-life issues, abortion as a legal right is less a single issue than an entire ethic that serves as the foundation stone for the culture of death.

With the idea that one human being has the right to take the life of another merely because the other’s life

is inconvenient, our culture elevates into law the primacy of the strong over the weak. The discord that this year's commencement has unleashed – between Notre Dame and the bishops, between members of the Notre Dame community, between Notre Dame and thousands of discouraged Catholic faithful – all this derives from an approach that for decades has treated abortion as one issue on a political scorecard. This is not the road to engagement. This is the route to incoherence, and we see its fruit everywhere in our public life.

Twenty-five years ago, on a similar stage on this campus, the then-governor of New York used his Notre Dame platform to advance the personally-opposed-but defense that countless numbers of Catholic politicians have used to paper over their surrender to legalized abortion. Eight years after that, the school bestowed the Laetare Medal on a United States Senator who had likewise long since cut his conscience to fit the abortion fashion.

Today we have evolved. Let us note that the present controversy comes at a moment where the incoherence of the Catholic witness in American public life is on view at the highest levels of our government. Today we have a Catholic vice president, a Catholic Speaker of the House, a Catholic nominee for Secretary of Health and Human Services, and so on. These are America's most prominent Catholics. And they have one thing in common: The assertion that the legal right to terminate a pregnancy – in the chilling euphemism of the day – must remain inviolable.

For those who think this a partisan point, let us stipulate for the record one of the curiosities of the Republican Party. Notwithstanding the party's prolife credentials, at the level of possible Presidential contenders, the most prominent pro-choice voices in the GOP arguably belong to Catholics: from the former Republican mayor and governor of New York,

to the Republican Governor of California, the Republican former governor of Pennsylvania, and so on. Notre Dame must recognize these realities – and the role she has played in bringing us to this day by treating abortion as a political difference rather than the intrinsic evil it is.

In his writings, Pope John Paul II noted the awful contradiction of our times, when more and more legal codes speak of human rights while making the freedom to deprive the innocent of their lives one of those rights. Several times he uses the word “sinister” to characterize the enshrinement of abortion as a legal right. And he states that all pleas for other important human rights are “false and illusory” if we do not defend with “maximum determination” the fundamental right to life upon which all other rights rest.

Maximum determination. Ladies and gentlemen, the unborn child’s right to life represents the defining civil

rights issue of our day – and it ought to be a defining civil rights issue on this campus.

This is not a popular witness. In our country, those who take it must expect ridicule and derision and a deliberate distortion of our views. In our culture, so many of our most powerful and influential institutions are hostile to any hint that abortion might be an unsettled question. And in our public life, one of the most pernicious effects of the imposition of abortion via the Supreme Court is that it has deprived a free people of a fair and open debate. Notre Dame remains one of the few institutions capable of providing a witness for life in the fullness of its beauty and intellectual integrity – and America is waiting to hear her voice.

Those who say that as Notre Dame engages the world, she cannot expect her guests to share all her beliefs are right. But that is not the issue. The issue is *that* we engage them. Think of how we would have

treated an elected Senator or President or Governor whose principles and actions were given over to seeing that segregation enjoyed the full and unqualified protection of American law. We would have been cordial ... we would have been gracious ... we would have been more than willing to debate – but we would have betrayed our witness if ever we brought them here on the idea that all that divided us was one political issue.

My friends, the good news is that the witness for life is alive at Notre Dame. We see this witness in the good work of teachers here in this room. We see this witness in the new Notre Dame Fund to Protect Human Life. I have seen this witness in a very personal way, on the cold gym floor of a suburban parochial school on the outskirts of Washington – where 200-plus students spent a freezing January night just so they could raise the Notre Dame banner at the annual March for Life. These are but a handful of the wonderful things going on at this campus. And

we know that this witness exists too in the other, unheralded acts of love designed to ensure that the unwed sophomore who kneels before the Grotto with an unexpected pregnancy weighing on her mind has a better choice than the cold front door of a Planned Parenthood clinic.

Unfortunately, people across this nation – and perhaps even here at this university – know little of these things. And they do not know because the university keeps this lamp under a basket. In her most public witness, Notre Dame appears afraid to extend to the cause of the unborn the same enthusiasm she shows for so many other good works here.

If, for example, you click onto www.nd.edu, you will often find a link for the Office of Sustainability, which happily informs you about all the things Notre Dame is doing to be green-friendly. You will find another link that defines the university with a series of videos that

ask, “What would you fight for?” Each home game during the football season, NBC broadcasts one of these videos. They are more than a dozen of them – each highlighting members of the Notre Dame community who are fighting for justice, fighting for advances in medicine, fighting for new immigrants, and so forth.

Imagine the witness that Notre Dame might provide on a Fall afternoon, if millions of Americans who had sat down to watch a football game suddenly found themselves face to face with a Notre Dame professor or student standing up to say, “I fight for the unborn.”

Even more important, imagine the larger witness for life that would come from putting first things first. So often we find support for abortion rights measured against decisions involving war, capital punishment, and so on. All these issues deserve more serious treatment. But the debate over these prudential judgments loses coherence if on the intrinsic evil of

abortion we do not stand on the same ground. What a challenge Notre Dame would pose to our culture if she stood united on this proposition: The unborn belong to no political party ... no human right is safe when their right to life is denied ... and we will accept no calculus of justice that seeks to trade that right to life for any other.

Now, there are different paths to this witness – and many who say they share it maintain their only problem is with the prolife movement itself: It's too Republican, it's not effective, it's too militant, and so forth. We who are prolife must admit that some of these criticisms have an element of truth. Yet those who advance them must also acknowledge that in practice such criticisms often serve not to strike out a bold new path for a more informed witness, but to rationalize a preference for remaining on the sidelines.

Tonight I ask our proliferators to open up the dialogue to your professors and classmates. Invite them in. Say to them: “Brothers! Sisters! We are not perfect, and we will be much improved by your participation. We are holding a place for you on the front lines. Come join us – and let us walk together in our witness for life.”

I appreciate that for some people, the idea of Notre Dame as an unequivocal witness for the unborn would be a limit on her work as a Catholic university. The truth is just the opposite. The more frank and forthright Notre Dame’s witness for life, the more she would be given the benefit of the doubt on the many judgment calls that the life of a great university entails. At this hour in our nation’s life, America thirsts for an alternative to the relativism that leaves so many of our young people feeling empty and alone. This alternative is the Catholic witness that Notre Dame was created to provide ... that Notre

Dame is called to provide ... and that in many ways, only Notre Dame can provide.

Let me end with a story about one of our family. His name is John Raphael; he belongs to the Class of '89; and he's an African-American who runs a high school in New Orleans. He's also a Josephite priest.

In his ministry, Father Raphael knows what it is like to answer the knock on his office door and find a woman consumed by the understandable fears that attend an unplanned pregnancy. He says that one of the greatest lessons he learned about how to respond to these women came from a friend of his, who had come to him in the same circumstances. The woman was an unmarried college student, and she told him what had surprised and hurt her most was how many friends greeted her news by saying, "Oh, that's terrible."

“That young lady taught me something,” says Father Raphael. “She taught me that what these women need first and foremost is to have their motherhood affirmed. For too many women, this affirmation never comes. We need to let these mothers know what their hearts are already telling them: you may have made a mistake, but the life growing within you is no mistake. That life is your baby, waiting to love and be loved.”

My young friends, this night I ask you: Make yours the voice that affirms life and motherhood. Be to those in need as the words of our alma mater: tender ... strong ... and true. And in your every word and deed, let the world see a reflection of the hope that led a French-born priest in the north woods of Indiana to raise Our Lady atop a dome of gold.

I thank you for your invitation. I applaud your courage. And as we go forth this evening, let us pray that our beloved university becomes the Notre Dame

our world so desperately needs: a witness for life that will truly shake down the thunder.

God bless you all.

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