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Notre Dame's pro-life center raises faculty concern

By JEAN PORTER

On Feb. 27, The Tribune reported that the University of Notre Dame has established a fund "to support pro-life activities on campus and beyond." As a member of the Notre Dame faculty, and even more as someone teaching in the field of moral theology, I read this with great interest.

If I have correctly understood this report, a university-sponsored center will now be promoting direct political activism, using the university's name, and presumably with the university's blessing. In my experience, it is very unusual for a university to sponsor and promote political activism in this direct way.

Certainly, many of the courses and other academic activities at any university, including Notre Dame, address issues of public policy and therefore have political implications. Professors may sometimes encourage, or even require their students to take part in political activities as a part of their general instruction. And of course we all know that almost every university recognizes a number of student clubs that are focused on political advocacy of one kind or another.

Nonetheless, it seems to me that by directly sponsoring political activism in support of a specific political agenda, the university is crossing a line. And frankly, it's a line that I feel we should not cross.

Notre Dame is a university, and as such, its mission is, first and foremost, to educate its students. Education involves much more than just conveying information or putting across a particular viewpoint - it means, most fundamentally, teaching our students to think for themselves, to mature into men and women of sound judgment and independence of mind. In order to mature in these ways, students need a lot of structured instruction and formation, but they also need a sense of freedom to raise questions and challenge received orthodoxies.

What does it do to our students' sense of that freedom, when the university itself endorses one specific political agenda, on a highly controversial and difficult set of questions?

In my experience, and the experiences of many of my colleagues, it is already very difficult to get undergraduates to discuss abortion in any kind of open-minded and balanced way. They are afraid to explore their own questions and concerns on this extremely difficult subject -- afraid of what their peers will think, and perhaps afraid of losing the good opinion of their professors as well. Once the university gives its official approval to an anti-abortion agenda, I suspect that any kind of real academic exploration of this question will become almost impossible.

It might be said that the abortion issue is so important, and so central to our identity as a Catholic university, that in this case, at least, the university should give priority to providing a clear witness, rather than worrying about encouraging the exploration of diverse points of view.

But leaving aside the question of what the "right view" on abortion really is -- and this is a far more

difficult question than is sometimes acknowledged -- I would respectfully suggest that someone who is prepared to develop his or her own moral judgments through a process of thoughtful, open-minded reflection is a better person morally, all things being equal, than someone who goes along with the prevailing opinion out of fear or complacency.

As for Notre Dame's status as a Catholic university, that's important to nearly everyone who teaches or studies here. But we cannot really sustain our mission and identity as a great Catholic university by compromising our identity as a university -- a community of open intellectual inquiry, in which diverse views can be explored in an atmosphere of mutual openness and respect.

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