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Human life fund is perfectly suited to Notre Dame

By DAVID SOLOMON

My colleague, Jean Porter, charged in her Viewpoint on Holy Saturday that the recently created Notre Dame Fund To Protect Human Life will promote "direct political activism." Her article is both inaccurate and misleading.

It is simply untrue that the fund promotes direct political activism. Neither the mission statement of the fund nor the events sponsored by the fund involve political activity that goes beyond the normal engagement of the contemporary university with the surrounding culture.

The purpose of the fund, according to its mission statement, "is to educate Notre Dame students in the rich intellectual tradition supporting the dignity of human life, specifically in its beginning stages, and to prepare those students, through personal witness, public service, and prayer to transform the culture into one where every human life is respected."

The first two events the fund sponsored on campus were a faculty debate and a dinner at which undergraduates could discuss life issues with faculty members. Neither event had a politically partisan tone. The fund is primarily concerned with teaching and research but, like many similar ethics enterprises, it also takes an interest in the moral formation of students. Of course, many universities -- including Notre Dame -- are broadly engaged in some sense with matters of cultural conflict and political debate.

Former President Father Theodore Hesburgh rose to national prominence largely because of his "engagement" in the civil rights revolution a generation ago. Anyone who visits his office -- and mine, too, for that matter -- will find in our offices a photograph of Father Hesburgh locked arm-in-arm with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. at a civil rights protest in Chicago in the 1960s. In the same spirit, the fund helped make it possible for Notre Dame students to march arm-in-arm with faculty and administrators at the March for Life in January.

Father Hesburgh was also instrumental in founding and funding the two most prominent and politically engaged academic institutes on campus -- the Kellogg Institute for International Studies and the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies. Even minimal attention to their mission statements and to the list of activities they fund establishes that they are politically engaged. But Porter would surely agree that they are not guilty of political activism.

Notre Dame is rightly proud that many students participate in service projects organized through the Center for Social Concerns, one of the jewels in Notre Dame's crown. This center is guided by the rich tradition of Catholic social teaching which provides direction for Catholic individuals and institutions in cultural and political matters, especially having to do with basic questions of social justice. The Center for Social Concerns surely need not apologize for its allegiance to Catholic social teaching, nor would Porter, I am sure, accuse them of political activism.

Underlying Porter's attack on the Notre Dame Fund are deeper issues about how intellectual and moral formation are to be combined in the contemporary Catholic university. She laments the fact that in her experience "it is already 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." My own experience with Notre Dame undergraduates after teaching them for 40 years is quite different. I find that most students are eager to explore the intellectual grounds for their often unreflective views on abortion. They are frequently intimidated -- not by the very few openly pro-life faculty at Notre Dame -- but rather by the prevailing opinion in our culture, especially among the educated elite in our colleges and universities, that it is intellectually second-rate to defend the intrinsic dignity of the unborn.

The sneers most frequent at Notre Dame, as elsewhere in contemporary higher education, are aimed at pro-life students, not at the pro-choice students whose views are in vogue in popular culture and celebrated at the very highest levels of our political regime, even in the inner-most recesses of the White House.

The Notre Dame Fund to Protect Human Life aims to help students recover the intellectual grounds necessary to defend the intrinsic dignity of every human being. The issue is moral truth, not politics.

In this respect, the fund continues Notre Dame's long history of promoting an educational environment in which students are introduced to ideas that help them resist unjust and exclusionary doctrines, whether those excluded are racial minorities, women or the unborn. If this is unacceptable "political activism," then Porter has a problem not with the Notre Dame Fund to Protect Human Life, but with the University of Notre Dame itself.

David Solomon is the W.P. and H.B. White director of the Notre Dame Center for Ethics and Culture as well as a faculty member in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame and a member of the steering committee for the Notre Dame Fund to Protect Human Life.
