

TALK FOR ND RESPONSE RALLY -- SUNDAY, MAY 17, 2009

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True friends of Notre Dame -- I thank you for your presence.

I want to thank especially our treasured students in ND Response for inviting me to be with you. It is a great privilege and honor. As I look out on the good and decent people gathered here, I know one thing: There is no place I would rather be.

I have been a teacher at Notre Dame for more than two decades. But today I come before you primarily as a Holy Cross priest – a member of the Religious Order that founded Notre Dame more than a century and half ago.

On November 26, 1842, an extraordinary French priest named Edward Sorin and a small band of Holy Cross brothers arrived at this site – a place where French missionaries had once ministered to the Potawatomi Indians. Fr. Sorin christened the place Notre Dame du Lac. He and his Holy Cross confreres began the work of building a college with a small log chapel as their point of departure. They aimed to serve Christ here. And they sought to evangelize in His name under the patronage of the Blessed Mother.

When the young priest wrote home to his superior – Blessed Basil Moreau, the founder of the Holy Cross Order – he put it this way: Here in northern Indiana, he said, he hoped to establish “one of the most powerful means for good in this country.” Since then, the university has prospered.

But building this university was not an easy task. The tiny school faced horrendous tribulations during its initial years. Damaging fires, a terrible cholera outbreak, and a series of financial crises failed to halt the onward march of the school. Whatever the odds against them, Father Sorin and his collaborators never gave up or quit.

Those of you familiar with Notre Dame’s history would know that this tenacity had perhaps its finest moment on April 23, 1879. That was the day that the so-called “big fire” swept over the campus. In just three hours much of the work of the previous three decades lay in ashes. A few days later, Father Sorin trudged through the still-smoldering ruins of the venture to which he had devoted his life. Then he called the whole

community into the campus church – which had miraculously survived the fierce blaze. With absolute faith and confidence, Father Sorin looked forward and told his anxious band of followers this: “If it were ALL gone I should not give up.” The effect was “electric.” As one observer put it, after that “there was never a shadow of a doubt as to the future of Notre Dame.”

Under God’s providential care, our university did recover and grow. Father Sorin ... his determined band ... and the generations of Holy Cross religious and their lay collaborators who followed them built something special. Their blood and sweat and tears are in the bricks and mortar -- and they are reflected in the lives that they touched.

They were “educators in the faith” who understood in the words of Fr. Moreau “that the mind could not be cultivated at the expense of the heart.” These folk built Notre Dame into a distinctive place that nurtured its students’ religious and moral development, as well as their intellectual lives. Notre Dame challenged them to serve God and neighbor. And, as it did so, it proudly proclaimed its Catholic identity and its loyal membership in a Church that was and is unafraid to speak of moral truths and foundational principles and beliefs. In the process, Notre Dame came to hold a special place in the hearts of Catholics all across America.

Now friends, jump ahead to today. The formal leadership of the University still proclaims its fidelity to this vision.

--University leaders assert that Notre Dame is and will be different, so that it can make a difference;

--University leaders assure the parents of incoming freshmen that Notre Dame won’t be like those ‘other’ schools that merely associate themselves with a Catholic or Jesuit ‘tradition’. NO! – to the contrary – here at Notre Dame, their children will find an institution unashamedly Catholic and willing to embrace all the tenets of our faith. Notre Dame will instruct its students in the Church’s moral truths and in its foundational beliefs and principles.

Of late, that rhetoric seems to ring rather hollow. The words have not been matched by deeds. Instead of fostering the moral development of its students Notre Dame’s leaders have planted the damaging seeds of moral confusion.

By honoring President Obama, the Notre Dame Administration has let the students and their parents down. And it has betrayed the loyal and faith-filled alumni who rely on Notre Dame to stand firm on matters of fundamental Catholic teaching – and so to affirm the sanctity of life.

The honor extended to Barack Obama says very loudly that support for practically unlimited access to abortion – and approval for the destruction of embryonic life to harvest stem cells – are not major problems for those charged with leading Notre Dame. They seem easily trumped by other issues, and by the opportunity to welcome the president to our campus. Bishop John D’Arcy, the great bishop of this diocese who so loves Notre Dame, said it well – Notre Dame chose “prestige over truth.” How embarrassing for an institution dedicated to the pursuit of truth to settle for temporary attention over eternal honor.

Friends, just ask yourselves whether anyone – regardless of their other accomplishments – would be honored here at ND if they held racist or anti-Semitic sentiments. They would not – and rightly so! Yet Notre Dame honors at this Commencement a politician who readily proclaims his support for the Freedom of Choice Act, and who is clearly the most radically pro-abortion president in this great nation’s history.

As you know well, Notre Dame undertook this sad action in the face of the 2004 instruction of the U.S. Catholic Bishops that “Catholic institutions should not honor those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles.” In so doing, the administration has distanced the University from the Church that is its lifeblood – the ultimate source of its identity.

A number of my fellow Holy Cross priests and I believe that such a “distancing puts at risk the true soul of Notre Dame.” Regrettably, this distancing also puts Notre Dame in the service of those who seek to damage the teaching authority of our Bishops. What a sad circumstance for an institution that should stand at the very heart of the Church.

Now, we can be sure that today the president will offer a fine address – crafted by a talented speechwriting team to appeal to a “Catholic audience.” No doubt too, President Obama will deliver it eloquently. There will surely be a tribute to Notre Dame’s former president, Father Hesburgh, for his important work on civil rights. The president will claim that he is influenced by Catholic social teaching and will appeal for folk to work together in the areas where common ground can be found. Most of the crowd will cheer ... the photos will be taken ... and soon the event will be over. The President will board Air Force One and fly away.

But what matters for us here is less what President Obama says, but rather what the day will mean for Notre Dame and its place in American Catholic life.

The truth is this: This painful episode has damaged the ethos and spirit of Notre Dame. But there is another truth that we must also remember: IT IS NOT THE END OF THE STORY!

Some among the administration of Notre Dame will want the issue to “go away” quickly. It may even be likely that there are some among them who genuinely understand the evil of abortion, and who are inwardly troubled by these recent events whatever their outward bravado.

--They will have a chance to show through future deeds and in very practical ways Notre Dame’s commitment to the prolife cause. Let us hope and pray that they take up that opportunity.

But we cannot rely on them. As we have seen, on their own, their commitment will never be more than tepid.

Instead, let us link ourselves with those Holy Cross religious over the generations who never gave up – whatever the set-backs ... whatever the trials ... whatever the personal cost. In some ways, the task before us today is tougher than theirs. In those early days, the problems were clear – but so too was the mission.

Now we are engaged in a more intellectual and spiritual struggle. Will we be true to the founding vision? Can we resist the subtle and not so subtle temptations to surrender our distinct religious identity -- and conform to the reigning and rather barren secular paradigm of what a university should be?

The Obama visit suggests that the University’s leadership has succumbed to this temptation. Yet when we look back on these days, I have a sense that what will stand out is how a group of dedicated prolife students, wonderful alumni, and ordinary Catholics who cherish this place refused to acquiesce in the Administration’s willingness to wink at its most fundamental values in exchange for the public relations coup that attends a presidential visit.

The people who refuse to give up – and I speak especially of you students --- have taken on the role of teachers here. While the administration and many of the faculty sold out easily for the photo-ops etc, you and some of your alumni sisters and brothers showed the benefits of your Notre Dame education. You held firm to the foundational principles of respect for life and for the dignity of every person. You are the ones who have understood what really matters. You refuse to just go along. You have made your voice heard and led the way to a better future.

You represent the very best of Notre Dame. You – along with your good professors and faithful alums – are the ones who can help Notre Dame recover from this painful and self-inflicted wound. You will not find it easy, and you will have moments where you will be discouraged. But you must remember there is so much that is good at Notre Dame that you can never relent in your efforts to call this place to be its best and true self -- proud of its Catholic identity and its loyal membership in the Church.

When I think of our courageous ND Response students my mind goes quickly to a marvelous passage in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Two Towers*. *Lord of the Rings* aficionados will know the passage well. It is delivered as Frodo and Sam eat what may be their last meal together before going down into the Nameless Land.

Sam says: *'And we shouldn't be here at all, if we had known more about it before we started. But I suppose it's often that way. The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of sport, as you might say. But that's not the way of it with tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I suspect that they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't.'*

Friends:

--Let us move forward together and let us never turn back.

--Let us take our instruction from the Lord, in the words that the great champion of life, John Paul II, used at the outset of his papacy: BE NOT AFRAID.

--Let us labor in this vineyard, so that Notre Dame might regain its true soul ... be faithful in its mission as a Catholic University ... and truly become the "powerful means for good" that Father Sorin dreamed about.

Thank you for having me. May Our Lady –Our Lady of the Lake-- keep you close. And may she ever watch over the university that bears her name.