

Fr. Jenkins's Self-Imposed Challenge

Early last term the OBSERVER printed a four-part letter in which I encouraged Fr. Jenkins to engage a public debate on the way ND is being run like a commercial enterprise, as well as on related issues concerning its PR operations and its methods of evaluating academic performance. Resolution of various problems associated with these issues, I argued, is crucial to ND's future as a top-ranked Catholic university. Debate on these matters may still be forthcoming. For the moment, however, Fr. Jenkins has chosen to focus on the interaction between Catholic values (or Catholic character) and academic freedom instead.

The inherent danger of making this topic the focus of a public discussion is that there is no shared understanding within the University of what either Catholic character or academic freedom amounts to. In some sectors, "Catholic values" is a code-term mandating strict orthodoxy in matters of reproductive morality, whereas others use it in a sense having more to do with social justice and shared economic opportunity. Similarly, "academic freedom" is understood by some to signify lack of restrictions in the conduct of teaching and scholarship, while others interpret it as meaning freedom to pursue truths divinely conveyed through the institutional Church.

In point of fact, ND is home to Catholics of widely divergent leanings (as well as to persons of other faiths, which is not our present concern). At one extreme are conservatives who make every effort to comply impeccably with the teachings they perceive as being passed on through the Church. At the other extreme is a group of liberal activists seemingly dedicated to changing Church teaching instead. While most of us are situated somewhere in the middle, we still have leanings toward one or the other of the two extremes.

Relations between these two poles of Catholicism at ND have never been easy. Mary Kate Malone's article in Monday's OBSERVER provided a valuable service in reminding us that local tensions between these two orientations go back to the time when ND initiated a serious attempt to become a ranking national university. Needless to say, that effort is still underway. To avoid losing ground as the effort continues, these disruptive tensions must be converted into a productive energy joining liberals and conservatives in a common cause.

It is hard to imagine a major national university that conceives academic freedom in terms primarily of the pursuit of divinely revealed truth. It is equally hard to imagine a genuinely Catholic university whose conception of morality is limited to concerns of social justice. If ND is to become a major academic force while remaining fully Catholic, it must enlist support from liberal and conservative forces alike.

By initiating a University-wide debate on Catholic values and academic freedom in terms of two highly divisive extracurricular events (both having to do with sexuality, the bugbear of the contemporary American Church), Fr. Jenkins has ratcheted up the tensions

between these contrasting forces in a manner that may prove counterproductive. The imminent danger is that he will use his presidential authority to mete out victory to one side and defeat to the other.

If his final verdict is that academic freedom trumps Catholic values across the board, there will be cries of outrage among conservatives and sighs of relief from the other direction. In the long term, such a decision might make it difficult to maintain the University's distinctively Catholic character.

On the other hand, if he decides that Catholic values systematically take precedence over academic freedom, this would cause rejoicing among conservatives but despair among liberals. (Not incidentally, such a decision would also get him off the hook with members of the Catholic hierarchy and of the Board of Trustees who may well have encouraged him to raise the issue in the first place). The long-term consequences of this decision, however, would bode poorly for ND's prospects of becoming a first-rate academic institution.

Having already stirred up the hornet's nest, Fr. Jenkins' most promising strategy may be to look for a way of enabling both sectors to emerge from the fray thinking of themselves as winners. After all, both are essential parts of the University he has been called to lead; and he must prove himself capable of inspiring both for the long haul ahead. A false step at this point would increase the likelihood of ND's becoming either an academic institution with diminishing Catholic presence or a staunchly Catholic institution with diminishing academic credibility.

As a student of ancient and medieval philosophy, Fr. Jenkins surely knows of Plato's conclusion that a successful statesman must find a way of blending the contrasting talents of the more virile and the more compliant characters within the state. If the virile predominate, the state will be rocked by constant warfare; whereas if the meek have their way, it will soon fall in defeat. This teaching in Plato's *STATESMAN* is the forerunner of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. As courage is the mean between cowardice and foolhardiness, so virtue in general takes the middle ground between opposing extremes.

In ND's current situation, extreme liberalism and extreme conservatism are both excesses to be avoided. Our common good lies in finding a *modus operandi* somewhere in the middle. Given his current position of leadership, it is Fr. Jenkins's task to direct us along a path that leads toward ND's becoming a genuinely Catholic university with genuinely top-rank academic stature. His challenge at the moment is to find a way of turning his back on partisan extremes and of leading all sectors of the University toward an outcome that makes us all winners.

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