

May 11, 2009

Dear Members of the Notre Dame Graduating Class of 2009:

This Sunday, as you receive your degrees at Commencement, your joy – and that of your families – will be shared by the faculty, staff, and administration of the University. We have had the privilege of laboring with each of you to inquire and discover, to teach and to learn, and we will send you off with affectionate and fond hopes for the future.

For those of you who are undergraduates, I feel a special kinship. You arrived in your dorm rooms as I arrived in the President's Office. You have learned much; I may have learned more. I am grateful for the opportunity I had to learn with you, come to know you, and to serve you during our time together at Notre Dame.

During your years here we have endeavored to train you in the various disciplines and urged you to ask the larger questions – discussing not only the technical and practical but also the ethical and spiritual dimensions of pressing issues. I have been proud of you as you've grappled with intellectual, political, and spiritual questions. But I have never been more proud than I have been watching the way you've conducted yourselves over the past several weeks.

The decision to invite President Obama to Notre Dame to receive an honorary degree and deliver the Commencement address has triggered debate. In many cases, the debate has grown heated, even between people who agree completely on Church teaching regarding the sanctity of human life, who agree completely that we should work for change – and differ only on *how* we should work for change.

Yet, there has been an extra dimension to *your* debate. You have discussed this issue with each other while being observed, interviewed, and evaluated by people who are interested in this story. You engaged each other with passion, intelligence and respect. And I saw no sign that your differences led to division. You inspire me. We need the wider society to be more like you; it is good that we are sending you into that world on Sunday.

I am saddened that many friends of Notre Dame have suggested that our invitation to President Obama indicates ambiguity in our position on matters of Catholic teaching. The University and I are unequivocally committed to the sanctity of human life and to its protection from conception to natural death.

Notre Dame has a long custom of conferring honorary degrees on the President of the United States. It has never been a political statement or an endorsement of policy. It is the University's expression of respect for the leader of the nation and the Office of the President. In the Catholic tradition, our first allegiance is to God in Christ, yet we are called to respect, participate in, and contribute to the wider society. As St. Peter wrote (I Pt. 2:17), we should honor the leader who upholds the secular order.

At the same time, and born of the same duty, a Catholic university has a special obligation not just to honor the leader but to engage the culture. Carrying out this role of the Catholic university has never been easy or without controversy. When I was an undergraduate at Notre Dame, Fr. Hesburgh spoke of the Catholic university as being both a lighthouse and a crossroads. As a lighthouse, we strive to stand apart and be different, illuminating issues with the moral and spiritual wisdom of the Catholic tradition. Yet, we must also be a crossroads through which pass people of many different perspectives, backgrounds, faiths, and cultures. At this crossroads, we must be a place where people of good will are received with charity, are able to speak, be heard, and engage in responsible and reasoned dialogue.

The President's visit to Notre Dame can help lead to broader engagement on issues of importance to the country and of deep significance to Catholics. Ultimately, I hope that the conversations and the good will that come from this day will contribute to closer relations between Catholics and public officials who make decisions on matters of human life and human dignity.

There is much to admire and celebrate in the life and work of President Obama. His views and policies on immigration, expanding health care, alleviating poverty, and building peace through diplomacy have a deep resonance with Catholic social teaching. As the first African-American holder of this office, he has accelerated our country's progress in overcoming the painful legacy of slavery and segregation. He is a remarkable figure in American history, and I look forward to welcoming him to Notre Dame.

As President Obama is our principal speaker, there will no doubt be much attention on your Commencement. Remember, though, that this day is *your* day. My fervent prayer is that May 17 will be a joyous day for you and your family. *You* are the ones we celebrate and applaud. Congratulations, and may God bless you.

In Notre Dame,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Fr. John Jenkins".

Rev. John I. Jenkins, C.S.C.
President