

Protecting the Most Basic of Human Rights

By Bishop Victor Galeone

Last March 20th it was announced that Father John Jenkins, the President of the University of Notre Dame, had invited President Barack Obama to address the graduates at the commencement ceremonies on May 17th and receive an honorary degree. Much debate ensued - both pro and con. What follows is my response to an email I received from a parishioner, whom I'll call "Jack."

Dear Jack,

I've read your email carefully. In response to your question, Yes, I did side with the bishops who censured Father Jenkins for inviting President Obama to address the graduating class at Notre Dame in May. Why did I do so? As I've said before, the right to life is the **foundation** of all other human rights. Without it, all our other rights are like the walls and rooms of a beautiful mansion - built on **sand**.

The bishops at Vatican II overwhelmingly approved the document, *The Church in the Modern World*, where we are encouraged to have an open dialogue with the world. And it's that very document that clearly states: "Life must be protected with the utmost care from the moment of conception: abortion and infanticide are unspeakable crimes." (# 51)

Furthermore, honoring President Obama is a **direct violation of the U.S. bishops'** July 2004 mandate in *Catholics in Political Life*: "The Catholic community and Catholic institutions should not honor those who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles. They should not be given awards, honors or platforms which would suggest support for their actions."

I'm amused when I hear some folks telling the bishops to stop meddling in politics. The right to life is, at root, a **moral** - not a political issue. It belongs to the fabric of our human makeup. If men of the cloth were prevented from addressing moral issues, would Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. have achieved all that he did in the area of civil rights?

I'm even more amused when I hear others asking how can one be sure when human life begins. That's a question for science, not theology. The most prominent embryology text for American medicine, *The Developing Human*, gives the answer:

"Human development **begins at fertilization**, when a male sperm unites with a female ovum to produce a single cell - a zygote. This highly specialized, totipotent cell marked the **beginning** of each of us as a unique individual."

I now want to address why the president should not have been invited to address the graduates at Notre Dame. From President Obama's public record as state senator in Illinois, we know that:

- He voted against the Illinois Born-Alive-Infant-Protection-Act, which mandated medical aid for a baby that survived an abortion.
- He strongly criticized the U.S. Senate when it passed the bill banning **partial-birth abortion**.
- He received a 100 percent approval rating from Planned Parenthood - the greatest abortion provider in the U.S.

I find the president's position most puzzling regarding Planned Parenthood - since 80 percent of their clinics are located in Black and Hispanic neighborhoods. He is an intelligent and well-read man. Surely, he must be aware of what Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood had to say about African-Americans in a letter written in 1939:

"We do not want word to go out that we want to exterminate the Negro population, and the minister is the man who can straighten out that idea if it ever occurs to their more rebellious members."

Jack, I'm disappointed that you wanted me, in my position as bishop, to sit by idly while a prestigious Catholic university awards an honorary degree to the president. In conscience, I could not do so. My silence in this matter would be tantamount to approval. As the legal adage states: "Silence gives consent."

It is interesting how often President Obama lays claim to the moral authority of President Lincoln. However, in the area of civil rights - for example, the Lincoln-Douglass debates on the issue of slavery - Obama's denial of the personhood of the preborn child aligns him with Senator Douglass' view of the slaves!

I'm attaching an article that Archbishop Charles Chaput, wrote concerning the Notre Dame affair. Like the archbishop, I pray for our president daily. My prayer is that the Lord will protect him and grant him a change of heart regarding this most basic of human rights - the right to life.