

Intimidated?

The seeds were probably sown centuries ago in a hostile atmosphere for Catholics in the New World. In 1633, as the earliest colonists were about to set sail for “Mary Land”, Cecil Calvert, the second Lord Baltimore, instructed “his said Governor and Commissioners” that while sailing and upon arrival at their destination “they instruct all the Roman Catholics to be silent on all occasions of discourse concerning matters of religion...”

Had the intimidation begun?

From those days and even to the present, many Catholics have too often felt that we have still to prove ourselves as truly American. Nothing has seemed capable of persuading the Protestant majority that Catholicism could be compatible with American democracy. It has been said that Catholics’ participation in World Wars I and II brought Catholicism a new acceptance. But the rejection of Al Smith, the Democratic U.S. presidential candidate in 1928 and the first Roman Catholic to run for President, largely on religious grounds, and the compromise of faith that John F. Kennedy felt it necessary to make in becoming the first Catholic president, gave evidence of a viral anti-Catholicism, a low-grade prejudice the famed American historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., once called “the deepest bias in the history of the American people.”

I think that a good case can be made that the subtle effect of such bias has often been to intimidate us Catholics. And now and then the subtle intimidation seems to work.

Is that why Georgetown University, founded as a Catholic institution, recently yielded to the White House and removed a crucifix and other religious symbols from behind the stage where the President spoke during a recent visit there?

Was it a fear of being “too Catholic” and a hankering to be “mainstream America” that prompted the University of Notre Dame’s invitation to our President not only to give this year’s Commencement address but also be awarded an honorary doctorate from the University?

The response of many Catholics to the Notre Dame case is not a slight on the Presidency or an attack on our President, nor should it be seen as such. It is about a flagship Catholic institution singling out for unique honor an undoubtedly dedicated and popular figure who unfortunately happens to be a most powerful leader in supporting abortion and threatening the conscience rights of medical professionals who refuse to cooperate in the killing of innocent human lives.

Bishop John M. D'Arcy of Forth Worth-South Bend, Indiana, spoke out swiftly and forcefully against the University's decision in announcing his decision not to attend the commencement. He said his choice was consistent with his responsibility as a bishop to "teach the Catholic faith in season and out of season," adding that a bishop "teaches not only by his words, but by his actions."

I applaud Bishop D'Arcy for his stance and also for his words urging "all Catholics and others of good will" to avoid "unseemly demonstrations" on a day that belongs to Notre Dame's graduates and their families.

The teaching responsibility that Bishop D'Arcy cites was at the heart of the 2004 guiding statement of the U.S. Bishops, "Catholics in Political Life," which states: "The Catholic community and Catholic institutions" should not honor those "who act in defiance of our fundamental moral principles" with awards, honors, or "platforms which would suggest support for their actions."

I do not think Notre Dame will withdraw its invitation. And I am not sure what good would be accomplished if they did, beyond fueling the prejudices of conscious or unconscious anti-Catholics. The damage has already been done.

The fact is that this debacle need not and should not have happened. It is unknown at present, what really prompted Notre Dame's invitation - and then its awkward attempt to have the staunchly pro-life former U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican Mary Ann Glendon somehow justify that invitation in a five minute acceptance speech for her reception of the University's highest honor, the Laetare Medal. Whatever the rationale, it cannot undo the confusion it has caused among Catholics who rightly look to their bishops and to the leaders of major Catholic institutions for moral guidance and for a consistent application of Church teaching. Hopefully, when it's all over, the administration of Notre Dame will reassess that decision, be willing to

bear the traditional and inevitable burden of being solidly Catholic and fully return to the Catholic fold.

But let's not fool ourselves into believing that there are not a good number of our fellow citizens - and some of them intimidated Catholics - who would be modern-day Lord Baltimores and wish us to be "silent on all occasions" in our secularist culture when our most fundamental beliefs are at stake.

Archbishop O'Brien will host "Conscience and Ethical Dilemmas in Catholic Healthcare," a symposium for medical professionals, May 9 from 1 to 4:30 p.m. at St. Joseph Medical Center in Towson. There is no admission charge. For more information, telephone 410-547-5537 or e-mail johanna.coughlin@archbalt.org.