

# **Speakers analyze Obama's invitation to Notre Dame commencement**

NOTRE DAME, Ind. - Professors from other institutions came to the University of Notre Dame to criticize both the way the university handled its invitation to President Barack Obama as 2009 commencement speaker and Obama's commencement address itself.

Speaking at a Nov. 12-14 conference on "The Summons of Freedom: Virtue, Sacrifice and the Common Good" were Francis Beckwith, professor of philosophy and church-state studies at Baylor University in Waco, Texas; Gwen Brown, professor of communication at Radford University in Virginia; and Matthew Franck, chairman of the department of political science at Radford.

Beckwith was critical of the Obama invitation, but did not suggest that a president who supports keeping abortion legal should be excluded from a Catholic university campus.

If Notre Dame "had played its cards right," Beckwith said, the university could have "properly honored" the president and still protected its Catholic identity by inviting him to give the commencement address but without offering an honorary doctorate.

If reporters inquired about why Obama did not receive an honorary doctorate, as all previous commencement speakers had, the university would have had an opportunity to explain: "Although we respect and honor President Obama's historic election as well as his accomplishments, we cannot award him an honorary doctorate in laws since he is actively engaged in making sure that a large segment of the human community, the unborn, are permanently sequestered from the protection of the laws," Beckwith said.

In the question-and-answer session following the presentations, Beckwith said that it would be far better for Catholic universities to show confidence in their pro-life

position by inviting people who support abortion to come to campus to argue what is “true and worthy” in their position.

Beckwith said in his paper that the Obama-Notre Dame controversy is a symptom of a deeper problem in Christian higher education: “a loss of confidence in theological truths in both inside and outside our ecclesial communities.”

“It is the result of Christian institutions, including academic ones, uncritically assimilating the trends that dominate our elite and popular cultures that require that all legitimate participants abandon the idea that theological traditions, and moral notions deeply connected to them, can be real and trustworthy sources of knowledge,” he said.

In their joint presentation in the same session with Beckwith, the husband-and-wife team of Brown and Franck made similar observations.

Brown said the Obama speech met generic requirements of a commencement speech, and it succeeded politically but failed ethically. The president “smuggled in” an argument about the relationship of faith to reason, Brown said, and depicted the pro-life side as unreasonable.

“For Obama, reason and faith are not mutually supportive, but rivals and antagonists,” Brown said.

In his analysis of the Obama speech, Franck said the president praised himself for having learned not to “demonize” those on the other side of the abortion issue, and he paid tribute to Notre Dame and its students for demonstrating, by the invitation to him, that they also do not demonize people either.

Franck said that Obama deftly used references to “common ground” on “moral issues” like poverty, AIDS and the death penalty, but depicted abortion as “just another cause-of-the-month that some people choose,” in spite of the fact that abortion is “the only one of these ‘moral issues’ that entails the deliberate and targeted killing of innocent human beings with the sanction of the law.”

The Obama message to the graduates about abortion, Franck said, was that the pro-choice side sprang from reason, whereas the pro-life side sprang from faith; and

faith, Obama told the graduates, “necessarily admits doubt.”

“What lesson did they (graduates) learn on their last day under the tutelage of Our Lady’s university, courtesy of the president of the United States?” Brown asked. “They learned how to make a bad argument look reasonable and even acceptable if it is cloaked in the robes of rhetoric. ... This was, by ethical standards, an abysmal last lesson.”

The “Summons of Freedom” conference was the 10th annual gathering sponsored by Notre Dame’s Center for Ethics and Culture. More than 100 papers were presented by scholars from all over the United States and several foreign countries. The conference title and theme were taken from remarks made by Pope Benedict XVI during his visit to the U.S. last year.