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Notre Dame's Invitation to Obama Sparks Protests and Soul-Searching

By **DOUGLAS BELKIN**

SOUTH BEND, Ind. -- For more than a century, a statue of the Virgin Mary has presided over the University of Notre Dame here from the top of the iconic golden dome in the center of campus.

This week, a different image dominates the sky above: an airplane trailing a giant photograph of a fetus aborted at 10 weeks.

Antiabortion groups have sponsored the airplane banner to protest the commencement speech President Barack Obama is scheduled to deliver here on May 17.

Mr. Obama is the sixth sitting president to be invited to speak at a Notre Dame graduation -- a tradition that allows one of the nation's most prestigious Catholic universities to honor its secular leader, and lets the president return the favor.

But this year's speech, coming from a president who supports abortion rights, has amplified longstanding internal tensions over Church teachings and academic freedom.

The fight has pitted the university against Bishop John D'Arcy, whose diocese includes Notre Dame. Four days after Notre Dame said on March 20 that Mr. Obama would be the commencement speaker, Bishop D'Arcy said he would not attend, citing what he called Mr. Obama's "longstanding unwillingness to hold human life as sacred."

Since then, at least 55 bishops have urged Notre Dame's president, Rev. John Jenkins, to rescind his invitation. Notre Dame has responded that Mr. Obama will be honored for breaking a racial barrier and his inspirational leadership -- not for his positions on abortion or embryonic stem-cell research.

A White House spokeswoman said Mr. Obama "does not govern with the expectation that everyone sees eye to eye with him on every position, and the spirit of debate and healthy disagreement on important issues are part of what he loves about this country."

Founded in 1842 by a French priest, and governed for more than a century by a religious order, Notre Dame rose to prominence at a time when Catholics endured widespread discrimination. The school's success -- both on and off the football field -- became a symbol of Catholic pride. In 1967, as Catholics

integrated into the American mainstream and the school grew as a research university, governance was transferred to a mixed board of trustees made up of laymen and clergy.

Competition between the school's religious and secular values have led to several clashes in the last half-century. During the civil-rights movement, Notre Dame's then-president, Theodore Hesburgh, marched with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Later, he opposed the Vietnam War. But he enforced a strict suspension policy of students who demonstrated on campus against the war.

In 1996, the school honored Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a supporter of abortion rights, but the diocesan bishop boycotted his speech. Today, one of the gay student organizations is not allowed to meet on campus, nor is it sanctioned by the school.

"Notre Dame is trying to do two things simultaneously that have never been done before: Be a world-class research university while it maintains its Catholic character," says David Campbell, a political-science professor at the university.

Since his inauguration, Mr. Obama has tried to reach out to both sides in an attempt to cool the abortion debate. But he also has angered antiabortion groups by backing stem-cell research and revoking the Mexico City Policy that barred funding for international family-planning groups that perform or promote abortion.

A survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life from April 23 to 27 found that half of Catholics aware of the speech thought it was right to invite Mr. Obama; 28% said it was wrong; and 22% had no opinion. In the November election, 54% of Catholics voted for Mr. Obama.

Prof. Campbell said 85% of the students he has polled supported Mr. Obama's visit. Among graduating seniors who do not support the visit, many will protest by wearing an image of a golden cross between two baby feet on top of their mortarboards.

Below the airplane banner, antiabortion activists who have converged on South Bend are making their point in a more aggressive way. They are driving trucks around the perimeter of the campus and carrying signs outside the main gate showing images of aborted fetuses.

On Friday, 22 people, some pushing strollers with dolls covered in fake blood, were arrested on campus for protesting Mr. Obama's visit.

A week earlier, Randall Terry, founder of Operation Rescue, was arrested after a similar protest. "My goal is to make such a political mud pit that the president doesn't want to walk through it to do the speech," said Mr. Terry.

Caitlin Conway, a 22-year-old political-science major who attends Mass once a week, says she is excited by Mr. Obama's appearance. She says she abhors the idea of abortion, but that she and others on campus are largely turned off by Operation Rescue's tactics and extreme stance.

"I consider myself someone who supports life and wants to protect life wherever possible," she says, "but I don't want to identify myself as a pro-life American as [the movement] currently stands."

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