

Common ground elusive in abortion debate: Obama's Notre Dame commencement address

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Will President Obama's plea for common ground on abortion during his speech at the University of Notre Dame persuade ardent abortion opponents to work with the new president? At first glance, it seems unlikely.

"Each side will continue to make its case to the public with passion and conviction," Obama said to a mostly receptive audience May 17 at the nation's flagship Catholic university. "But surely we can do so without reducing those with differing views to caricature."

In speaking of common ground, the president evoked the memory of the late cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago, who sought conciliation on many tough issues. But Obama's entreaties for "open hearts" and "fair-minded words" may fall on deaf ears.

"No one in the pro-life movement believes his promises about abortion reduction," said Deal Hudson, director of InsideCatholic.com, a conservative Web site, and a former GOP adviser. "Every decision he's made thus far would do nothing but increase the number of abortions."

Chuck Donovan, executive vice president of the Family Research Council, criticized the administration's funding of embryonic stem cell research and plans to reduce conscience protections for health-care workers. An FRC representative met with White House officials recently to plan ways to reduce abortions.

"To be credible," added Donovan, "that plan would have to begin with reversing every decision Obama has made on abortion to date."

Obama's pragmatic efforts are up against ideological stances that both sides acknowledge may be irreconcilable.

But the applause of Notre Dame students for Obama's suggestions for abortion reduction was a sign of resistance to the views of the Catholic bishops who opposed his speech and his being awarded an honorary degree, some Catholics say. Richard McBrien, a theology professor at Notre Dame, said the protesters outside the campus and the bishops critical from afar miss a nuance in the abortion debate.

"The issue is not whether abortion is moral or not," said McBrien. "The issue is whether it should be criminalized and, if so, under what circumstances? . . . All of us believe abortion is immoral. The question is, what is the best way to at least reduce the number of them?"

Other progressive Catholics also hope Obama's words will be heeded.

"His call for debating reasonably and for using 'fair-minded words' to acknowledge the good faith of those who disagree with us shows the right way forward through moral and political impasses: debate, not demonization," said Terrence W. Tilley, president of the Catholic Theological Society of America.

[Notre Dame officials "pulled off a major public relations coup," said former *New York Times* religion editor Kenneth Briggs, author of two books on Catholicism. "Inviting Obama was a deft way of ridding themselves of the Catholic right in order to gain greater respectability from the academic establishment. They've craved top billing as a research university, but suspicions about academic freedom continue to dog them," Briggs told the *Century* in remarks similar to those he made May 13 on the blog of the *National Catholic Reporter*.]

Obama has proven to be a pragmatist in the White House, political analysts say, noting that the president has backed away from several strong political stances he took during last year's election campaign.

In April he softened his determination to push for the Freedom of Choice Act, which would guarantee the right to legal abortion even if *Roe v. Wade* were overturned. He now says that particular legislation is not a priority for him.

At one point in his Notre Dame address, Obama referred to a law that "binds people of all faiths and no faith together." It is, he said, "the Golden Rule—the call to treat one another as we wish to be treated." —*Religion News Service*