

# Journal of Catholic Legal Studies

---

Volume 49  
Number 2 *Volume 49, 2010, Number 2*

Article 6

---

February 2017

## Honors, Awards, and the Catholic Moral Tradition

Karen Stohr

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/jcls>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

---

This Symposium is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Catholic Legal Studies by an authorized editor of St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [selbyc@stjohns.edu](mailto:selbyc@stjohns.edu).

# HONORS, AWARDS, AND THE CATHOLIC MORAL TRADITION

KAREN STOHR<sup>†</sup>

For some time now, Catholic colleges and universities have been finding themselves under increasing pressure to ensure that their choices of speakers and honorees conform to a certain set of standards. The controversy over President Obama's commencement speech and honorary degree at the University of Notre Dame in 2009 was especially public but not especially new. In 2004, the U.S. Catholic Bishops issued a statement containing the following remark: "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."<sup>1</sup> Since that time, various groups have been pressing the issue from one direction or another, with particular urgency when the honoree in question holds pro-choice views or supports political candidates who do. The list of honorees to whom objections have been made is quite long and includes low-level politicians and activists as well as high-profile figures like President Obama and Justice Stephen Breyer, who received an ethics award from Fordham University School of Law in 2008.<sup>2</sup>

I take it to be obvious that there should be at least some constraints on the choice of speakers and honorees at Catholic institutions and, moreover, that those constraints should be based in the Catholic moral framework. But of course, saying only this much amounts to saying very little at all. In this

---

<sup>†</sup> Karen Stohr is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Georgetown University and Senior Research Scholar in Georgetown's Kennedy Institute of Ethics. She has a B.A. from the University of Notre Dame and an M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her primary research areas are Aristotelian virtue ethics, Kantian ethics, and Catholic medical ethics.

<sup>1</sup> U.S. CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, *CATHOLICS IN POLITICAL LIFE* (2004), available at <http://www.uscc.org/bishops/catholicsinpoliticallife.shtml>.

<sup>2</sup> One of the primary missions of the Cardinal Newman Society is the identification of such speakers, and its activities in support of this mission cast a very broad net.

particular debate, the devil really is in the details. Although the quoted line from the bishops' statement has often been interpreted as presenting definitive reason for disqualifying particular speakers and honorees, the statement itself is vague on crucial points. What counts as "honoring," what counts as "acting in defiance" of fundamental moral principles, and what kinds of honors and speaking opportunities "suggest support" for those actions? Answering these questions requires attention to both the relevant principles in Catholic moral teaching and the nuances of their application in particular circumstances.

The philosophical subtlety of the Catholic moral tradition is one of its greatest strengths, but its finely wrought distinctions have tended to generate confusion, annoyance, and impatience among Catholics and non-Catholics alike. At stake in the debate over honors at Catholic institutions are philosophical concepts like intention and cooperation, concepts on which a great deal of the Catholic moral framework depends. Those who dismiss appeal to such concepts in these cases as mere casuistry are, wittingly or not, setting aside a huge swath of the Catholic intellectual tradition and depriving themselves of powerful argumentative tools.

As it turns out, arguments about the permissibility of honoring certain individuals at Catholic institutions will inevitably be very complicated, involving many different moral layers. Because of this complexity, I will limit my discussion to a fairly narrow set of cases; namely, those involving (1) politicians who are (2) not Catholic and (3) whose public record reflects a pro-choice stance. My restriction to pro-choice honorees probably requires little explanation; it is certainly the issue that generates the most controversy when it comes to Catholic institutions. The Catholic Church, of course, accepts the principle that abortion, defined as the intentional killing of an embryo or fetus,<sup>3</sup> is both intrinsically and—more significantly—gravely wrong. Moreover, this principle is supposed to be a truth accessible through the use of natural human reason and, hence, is something that non-Catholics can also be morally responsible for accepting or

---

<sup>3</sup> I recognize that use of the words "embryo" and "fetus" may imply that abortion is not the killing of a human person and hence, begging the question against the pro-life side. I do not intend that to be the case, but in my view, there is no terminology available that does not beg the question. I employ these medical terms as the best of a set of bad options.

rejecting. This matters. As I will show, opposition to pro-choice honorees tends to presuppose that such honorees have at least one indefensible moral view and that having such a view is a failing serious enough to preclude them from being honored for unrelated accomplishments. This presupposition is not often articulated, but it does quite a lot of work behind the scenes and, hence, needs to be addressed explicitly.

I focus on politicians because they present special problems for Catholic institutions by virtue of the fact that they, unlike many other honorees, have public records that make plain their views on controversial moral issues, including abortion. By contrast, an institution is unlikely to know what stance a Nobel laureate or celebrated novelist takes on abortion or embryonic stem cell research, and it may well have little incentive to find out. I am not suggesting that it is necessarily unfair to hold politicians to a different standard than scientists or authors; indeed, insofar as the arguments opposing pro-choice honorees rely on concerns about scandal, the public nature of the honoree's stance is a relevant consideration. Still, the discrepancy is worth noting if the institution's aim is to develop a consistent policy about speakers and honorees.

I focus on non-Catholics because I take it that Catholic commencement speakers are subject to a second set of norms based on their status *as Catholics*, norms that do not apply to non-Catholics. A Catholic politician who is publicly pro-choice could be opposed on the grounds that he is a Catholic in bad standing with the Church and Catholic institutions should not confer honors on Catholics in bad standing. I set this issue aside as one requiring theological expertise that I lack. Obviously, a non-Catholic cannot be opposed on the basis that she is a bad Catholic or refuses to accept the teaching authority of the Catholic Church. If there are reasons to oppose a non-Catholic, pro-choice commencement speaker, they will have to be grounded in something else. My interest in this paper is that something else.

Let me add a few further restrictions. I will assume that the pressing issue with commencement speakers is not the speech itself but rather the honorary degree that ordinarily accompanies a commencement speech. I do not think that this distinction matters much in the end, but since at least some people object only or primarily to the honorary degree, I will focus on that. I

will also assume that the potential speaker has accomplishments that would otherwise warrant honoring by a Catholic institution, such as a robust public commitment to ending poverty. Finally, I will assume that the potential speaker would not in any way be advocating for a pro-choice position during her speech or the surrounding commencement activities. Thus, the speech would not be a platform in the sense described by the bishops in the quote above.

What would justify opposition to a non-Catholic commencement speaker who has accomplishments and commitments worthy of honor but who also happens to be pro-choice? There are several possibilities. Among the most obvious is the claim that by giving such a person an honorary degree, a Catholic institution would give scandal to the faithful, and there is a moral duty not to give scandal.

Scandal has a technical meaning within theology that I will not attempt to spell out in detail. But let me just say that if the primary objection to pro-choice commencement speakers is that honoring them will give scandal in the technical sense, it is not a terribly compelling one. Let us consider the definition of scandal as set out in the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

Scandal is an attitude or behavior which leads another to do evil. The person who gives scandal becomes his neighbor's tempter. He damages virtue and integrity; he may even draw his brother into spiritual death. Scandal is a grave offense if by deed or omission another is deliberately led into a grave offense.<sup>4</sup>

The sin of giving scandal is essentially the sin of corrupting people by causing them to have false beliefs on matters of moral importance, beliefs that may lead them to act in morally bad ways. Importantly, the criterion for something's giving scandal is *not* simply that someone feels scandalized by it. Certainly, many Catholics felt scandalized by President Obama's honorary degree, but that does not prove that giving the degree in fact gave scandal in the technical sense. This is evident enough if one reflects on the fact that there were undoubtedly Catholics who felt scandalized when Catholic institutions opened their doors to African-Americans and women. Obviously, it does not follow that

---

<sup>4</sup> CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ¶ 2284 (2d ed. 1997).

those institutions were in fact giving scandal. If anything, they were leading people away from sinful beliefs and actions based on those beliefs.

In order for a Catholic institution to give scandal by honoring someone pro-choice, it would need to be the case that the honor produced actual, deleterious effects on the beliefs or actions of those witnessing it or hearing of it. Such effects might include the sowing of confusion among those unaware of the Church's actual teaching, the weakening of their moral convictions, or an increase in the likelihood that they will engage in immoral behavior. I assume that bestowing an honorary degree on a pro-choice speaker is not going to encourage members of the audience to either provide or procure an abortion when they would not otherwise do so. The more plausible argument is that, in honoring someone who is publicly pro-choice, a Catholic institution gives the impression that it does not take abortion to be gravely wrong and that this will mislead people about a moral truth. Whether this argument is convincing depends on the likelihood that bestowing a degree will have that effect. If the objection to honoring a pro-choice speaker is that it will weaken the moral convictions of the faithful, then we need some reason for thinking that this will actually be the result.

I will grant that Catholic educational institutions have a duty to avoid giving scandal. I will further grant that it is an especially pressing duty in virtue of their teaching mission. What I doubt is that bestowing an honorary degree on someone who holds pro-choice views always, or even usually, gives scandal in the sense set forth in the Catechism. It is hard to believe that any reasonably perceptive Catholic could easily be misled about the Church's stated position on abortion, which is about as clear and consistent as a moral position could be. It is even less plausible to think that people opposed to abortion would be inclined to change their minds by the bestowal of the degree. If the institution is clear about the accomplishments for which the speaker is being honored, and if those accomplishments are in the service of ends promoted by the Church, then it seems unlikely that the honorary degree will actually sow confusion among the faithful about the wrongness of abortion or the Church's stance on it.

But even if honoring a pro-choice politician does not fulfill the technical criteria for giving scandal, there may be some other sense in which it might be plausible to call it scandalous. The most likely sense—and indeed, the one that I think prevailed during the debate over President Obama’s presence at Notre Dame—is that there is something morally reprehensible about creating such a public association between a Catholic educational institution and a pro-choice politician. Perhaps Catholic institutions have a moral responsibility to distance themselves from individuals who are widely known to hold views at odds with central moral teachings of the Church. In this sense, it would be the association itself that is scandalous, not the actual effects of bestowing a degree.

This dilemma is an instance of a general moral problem known as the “dirty hands” problem or, alternatively, as the problem of “keeping one’s hands clean.” The reference, of course, is to Pontius Pilate’s act of washing his hands of the crucifixion of Jesus. Pilate wanted to divest himself of connection with and responsibility for Jesus’ death, and his hand washing was symbolic of his intention to keep clear of it. One could make the case that Catholic institutions have a moral obligation to keep their hands clean of association with the pro-choice political movement and that granting an honorary degree to someone who is known to be pro-choice violates this obligation.<sup>5</sup>

I think that the better argument against honoring pro-choice politicians rests on this point, not on the idea that it actually gives scandal in the technical sense. The idea that it is morally important to distance ourselves from actions that we properly regard as wrong is well entrenched in Catholic moral thinking in the form of the principle of cooperation, to which I will return later. But let me just point out that if the problem lies with the association itself, then it will be necessary for those who oppose pro-choice speakers to let go of the idea that the objection to President Obama or Justice Breyer is not personal. The objection is most definitely personal because it rests on the assumption that there is something morally troubling about the individual himself or herself. This is not necessarily a problem for the view, but it is important to be clear about the nature of the objection.

---

<sup>5</sup> Other forms of association, such as inviting a pro-choice politician to speak as part of a panel discussion, might not violate this obligation, or violate it to the same extent.

The objection is to the person and his or her views, and the claim is that a Catholic institution should not honor such a person. It is the association with the person in that context that creates the dirty hands problem, and it is impossible to explain that without identifying what it is about the person, his actions, or his opinions that demands distance.

Of course, not everyone has the qualifications or credentials necessary to be an appropriate recipient of an honorary degree; indeed, most of us do not. Such speakers are expected to have accomplished important things or exemplify admirable traits. Bestowing an honorary degree implies that the recipient has done something or is someone *worth* admiring in this particular way.<sup>6</sup> Let us suppose, not implausibly, that both President Obama and Justice Breyer meet the general criteria for having accomplishments worthy of an honorary degree. What disqualifies them is that their support for abortion rights renders them guilty of a crucial moral failing in the eyes of the Church. This is not the polite way of putting the point, but it is, I think, the most accurate way. The most vocal critics of Obama's presence at Notre Dame may have been lacking in civility, but they were at least candid about what they found so objectionable about him.

On what grounds is it possible to argue that support for legalized abortion is a moral failing? At a minimum, the claim must be that the person who votes for pro-choice legislation or expresses support for the legality of abortion is making a serious moral mistake, one for which he or she is properly held culpable. The mistake must be so serious or so fundamental that it demands that a Catholic institution steer clear of the association with that person expressed by awarding him or her an honorary degree, regardless of what other good things the person may have accomplished. It must be a mistake that reveals not simply ignorance but something deeply troubling about the person's character.

Those who oppose commencement speakers on these grounds have sometimes pointed out that we do apply this standard to speakers who hold morally abhorrent views about which there is

---

<sup>6</sup> It has been argued that it would be better for colleges and universities to eschew famous political figures altogether in favor of lesser known, but perhaps even more admirable, private individuals. Having sat through many commencement speeches, I sympathize with that view, but I will set it aside for the moment.



more general agreement. No Catholic institution would honor an active member of the Ku Klux Klan, no matter how many corporal works of mercy he had racked up. Catholics across the political spectrum would likely feel very comfortable in attributing moral blame to the Klan member for having the views that he does. We judge that his problem lies in his moral character, that his views are evidence of a warped moral outlook, and that in acting on those views, he engages in gravely sinful behavior. The moral outlook of a Klan member is reprehensible by the light of Catholic teaching, and this is clearly a sufficient reason to disqualify him as a speaker. Given the centrality of the abortion issue, might not the same be said about a pro-choice speaker?

In the Catholic tradition, opposition to abortion is grounded in what can only be described as a bedrock principle that intentionally killing innocent human beings is always morally wrong. This principle admits of no exceptions; what people tend to think of as exceptions are not in fact exceptions to the principle. Rather, they are cases where the principle does not apply. Thus, when questions arise about whether a particular procedure can be used to treat an ectopic pregnancy, the issue is not whether the procedure is an instance of justified abortion but whether it is an abortion at all. The matter is settled, at least in theory, by determining whether the action counts as aiming at death. Aiming at death is always wrong; where killing is justified, it is justified only insofar as it is aiming at something other than death.

This way of reasoning, familiar to many in the form of the principle of double effect, has very broad applicability in the Catholic moral tradition. Among other things, it helps distinguish effective pain treatment from euthanasia and terrorism from justified use of force. The principle of double effect is important in the Catholic moral tradition precisely because of the centrality of the underlying prohibition against aiming at death. Aiming at death is wrong because it is fundamentally incompatible with respecting the full dignity of each human being. Double effect helps us sort out when an action is aiming at death and when it is not. The Catholic Church's view is that by definition, all abortions are aiming at the death of an innocent human being and, thus, violate the prohibition against intentional killing.

In the eyes of the Church, the intentional killing of innocents is both intrinsically evil, meaning that there are no circumstances in which it could ever be good, and gravely evil, meaning that it is a very serious moral wrong. Not all intrinsic evils are gravely evil, and not all grave evils are intrinsically evil.<sup>7</sup> When it comes to abortion, the public focus tends to be on the idea that it is intrinsically evil. This is understandable but misplaced. In fact, it is the idea that intentional killing is gravely evil that does the heavy lifting in arguments against pro-choice honorees.

It is often said that groups protesting honorees at Catholic institutions focus too narrowly on abortion, to the exclusion of equally important moral issues. This criticism is partly justified and partly unjustified. It is unjustified because there are very few actions, if any, that compare in gravity to the intentional killing of innocents.<sup>8</sup> It is justified because abortion is not the only form of intentional killing around and also because intentional killing is not the only kind of grave evil around. Serious, deliberate violations of human dignity are widespread, and the Church has reason to object to them all.<sup>9</sup>

In the Catholic natural law tradition, moral truths such as the gravely evil nature of intentional killing, are accessible via natural human reason, as well as through Church teaching. In other words, one can come to know them via the Church, but the Church is not the only route to this knowledge. The implication is that the Catholic Church should be able to offer non-theological arguments for all of its moral claims, including the claim that abortion is gravely wrong. This ability offers an enormous advantage, both because it makes possible substantive moral engagement with people who do not share the Catholic faith and also because it enables the Church to hold non-Catholics responsible for the moral principles that they accept. And yet it also poses an enormous responsibility. The Church shoulders a burden, which it has always gladly taken on, of developing sound arguments based in human reason for each

---

<sup>7</sup> On this distinction, see M. Cathleen Kaveny, *Intrinsic Evil and Political Responsibility*, AMERICA, Oct. 27, 2008, at 16.

<sup>8</sup> The Catholic Church wisely refrains from ranking evils, but killing is undoubtedly high up on the list.

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, most reflective Catholics opposing pro-choice honorees also oppose honorees who support torture, indiscriminate use of force in war, and so forth.

moral position that it espouses. It is thus fair to question the extent to which the Church has succeeded in making its views on abortion plausible to those who have no reason to accept those views on faith alone.

The short answer, I think, is that the Church has not succeeded in making those views plausible to people outside its own tradition and, indeed, even to many people within it. I say this not to fault Catholic theologians and philosophers; certainly, there have been valiant and sophisticated efforts at constructing such arguments, many of which have been largely ignored by the secular world. And yet, thoughtful, reflective people remain divided on the topic. The division is not because some people take the view that it is permissible to intentionally kill innocent human beings. Rather, it is because those people do not accept the claim that an embryo or a fetus is a human being with full dignity. The Church is committed to the claim that this is a truth accessible to human reason. The best arguments in support of this view rely in part on scientific facts about embryology and fetal development, most of which are not really in dispute. The dispute is over the moral significance we attach to those scientific facts.

I am not suggesting that there can be no argument that can take us from the facts of human development to the moral claim that embryos and fetuses are full human persons. But it is quite plainly true that there are many reflective people of good will who are not convinced by even the best attempts at such arguments and many others who are unaware of those arguments.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, they have arguments of their own. Some of those arguments are rooted in compassion and sympathy for the plight of women who find themselves unhappily pregnant. Some of them are rooted in compelling intuitions about what we see as our obligations toward, say, toddlers in need of rescue from a burning building versus our obligations toward embryos in a similar position. Many people who hold these arguments are people of good will who have thought very seriously and reflectively about this issue but still find the pro-life arguments inadequately convincing.

---

<sup>10</sup> I do not think we can consider it a moral flaw in someone that she is not combing academic journals for the latest developments in Catholic moral theology.

What is the appropriate moral stance to take toward someone who is not convinced about the truth of a moral claim? This is a question to which there can be no universal, easily applicable answer. The Catholic moral framework is not, of course, a relativistic one. The moral truths on which the Church relies do not vary according to time, place, or standpoint. But it is one thing for a moral claim to be true and another thing for it to be obviously true. A brief look at history suffices to show that what now seem like obvious moral truths, such as that human beings have equal moral standing regardless of their race, were not obvious to everyone in the past, including the moral leaders of the Church.<sup>11</sup> What we have in the debate over abortion is a moral claim, the truth of which is clearly not obvious to everyone, including many reflective people of good will.

Recognizing this shows the limitations of the analogy with honoring a Ku Klux Klan member. In our society, we no longer have serious moral debates about the equality of African-Americans. This means that honoring the Klan member today is relevantly different from honoring a pro-choice politician today. A better analogy would be with honoring a Klan member during a time period where there was serious moral debate over racial equality. But even then, the analogy is misleading. A Klan member would have likely been an active participant in direct assaults against the dignity of African-Americans. But a pro-choice politician is not, by virtue of voting for pro-choice legislation, an active participant in any direct abortion. The correct analogy, then, is with a politician who supports his government's racist policies and laws. Would a Catholic institution have been wrong to honor such a politician in the 1940s? I myself do not think the answer to this question is self-evident, nor can we answer it by reference to our current moral framework. We would need to adopt the moral framework extant in the 1940s, and that is not an easy thing for us to do seventy years later. But we can say that the answer would depend, as it does now, on what the institution was honoring the politician for and how closely the politician had identified himself and his life's work with those racist policies.

---

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, one of Martin Luther King Jr.'s greatest strengths as an orator was his skill at making this particular moral truth obvious.

I will take for granted that no Catholic institution could possibly honor someone who had, as his or her primary career or personal objective, the continued legalization of abortion and expansion of its availability. In such a case, it would be hard to see what about the person's career the honorary degree could possibly be honoring. I will also take for granted, although I know that some will not, that there is no difficulty in honoring someone like Bart Stupak or Douglas Kmiec, who publicly denounces abortion and can justifiably claim to be committed to minimizing or ending it.<sup>12</sup> The much harder cases are the ones in between, where the person has not taken on abortion rights advocacy as a major commitment but has also not explicitly rejected or opposed abortion rights. It is further complicated when such people, like Justice Breyer and President Obama, have the power to produce direct effects on abortion law or policy. Then the question becomes whether they can be said to be employing judgment over political matters in a defensible way.

The exercise of moral judgment in the context of political decision making is structured by a number of competing moral considerations, and there is no obvious sorting mechanism that will enable us to put those considerations in a neatly organized, exceptionless order. The Church has always recognized this feature of moral judgment, evidenced by its reliance on the ancient and medieval virtue tradition. In that tradition, largely drawn from Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, the central virtue of practical wisdom—more commonly, but also more misleadingly, called prudence—is essential to the practice of moral judgment in particular contexts. The virtue of practical wisdom is the exercise of human wisdom about practical matters, where that wisdom is oriented and directed by true convictions about the good for human beings. The practically wise person is capable of sorting through the messiness of actual human problems and discerning the course of action that best honors and promotes that good.

Consider the venerable principle of cooperation. A fundamental moral principle in Catholic thought is that we must never intend evil. In theory, that sounds easy enough, but, of

---

<sup>12</sup> The Cardinal Newman Society routinely objects not only to honoring people who are clearly pro-life but also to those who are Democrats or supporters of Democratic policies, like health-care reform. I can see no plausible argument for this position.

course, in practice things are not so simple. The pursuit of morally good aims may require compromises that bring us closer to evil than we would like. The function of the principle of cooperation is to help us discern when we are getting too close. Formal cooperation, in which we take up the evil end as our own, is strictly forbidden. Material cooperation, in which we do not take up the evil end but further it through our actions, is sometimes warranted and sometimes not, depending on the nature and gravity of both the evil and the good to be obtained, as well as the relationship between the person's actions and the evil outcome. In other words, it requires the discernment that is the hallmark of practical wisdom.

The Church has made clear that it regards voting in favor of permissive abortion laws as a potentially morally objectionable act in itself.<sup>13</sup> But when it is morally objectionable, it is not so in exactly the same way that abortion itself is, although that point is sometimes lost in the rhetoric. Voting in favor of loosening restrictions on or providing funding for abortions is simply not a case of intentional killing on any reasonable account of intentional action. At most, it is cooperation with intentional killing, and it is far from clear what kind of cooperation with abortion a pro-choice voting record represents and what the implications of it should be for our attitude toward the cooperators.

Formal cooperation with something gravely wrong, where the cooperator shares the aim of those engaging in the prohibited action, is also gravely wrong. But it is possible to vote for a piece of pro-choice legislation without having anyone's death as one's aim.<sup>14</sup> This point is usually acknowledged on all sides; however, its importance is often missed or downplayed. It matters because, while there can be nothing that would justify the act of intentionally killing an innocent person, there can be something that would justify the act of permitting such killings to occur. It is not possible to perform or procure an abortion without intending a death; it is possible to vote for pro-choice legislation without intending anyone's death. Although voting for permissive abortion legislation could count as formal cooperation with abortion, it need not. Indeed, charity would suggest that

---

<sup>13</sup> See UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility* 11 (2007).

<sup>14</sup> See *id.*

when politicians claim that they themselves oppose abortion but are voting pro-choice for other reasons, we take them at their words and assume that they are engaging in, at most, material cooperation.

Material cooperation comes in different species as well and certainly not all material cooperation will be justified according to Church teaching. It depends on the good that is sought and the distance between the action and the result. A politician who votes for a broad funding mandate for health care, one that would have the effect of improving access for pregnant women and young children, may reasonably think that this will be more effective in reducing abortion rates than simply outlawing or restricting access to abortion. Likewise, a politician may throw his or her weight behind programs that provide affordable, high quality child care—an important problem on which the Catholic bishops have, regrettably, largely been silent—on the grounds that it would help address the financial burdens faced by poor pregnant women. These are prudential judgments, subject to the conscientious deliberation of people of good will. This is sometimes denied by those eager to argue that there can in principle be nothing that justifies any kind of material cooperation with abortion. But this argument is a misuse of the very concept of cooperation and, ultimately, a rejection of the sophisticated moral framework it represents. The principle of cooperation recognizes the fact that keeping one's hands perfectly clean in the messy business of real life is not always an option. Sometimes, the choice is between dirty hands and total withdrawal. Church teaching does not specify a priori which choice must be made.

It is difficult to know whether a given politician who votes for pro-choice legislation is engaging in formal cooperation or material cooperation with abortion itself. It is also not easy to determine just how remote a given instance of material cooperation is, particularly when it comes to voting for complicated pieces of legislation with many amendments attached. To some extent, we need to take people at their word when they explain their motivations, and, certainly, charity demands that we presume them to be sincere unless we have evidence to the contrary. Bart Stupak was roundly castigated by pro-life factions for having voted in favor of health-care reform, but it would be difficult to argue that his voting for it could have

been anything other than very remote material cooperation with abortion—if even that, given his clear pro-life commitments.

What this complex landscape indicates, I think, is that it is impossible to judge the moral suitability of a potential honoree without stepping back and looking at the entirety of the person's actions and commitments and, moreover, doing so with the recognition that we live in a complicated world in which compromises are often demanded, particularly from politicians. In this sense, the Nobel laureate, whose voting record on abortion is conducted entirely by secret ballot, has it much easier than the politician. It is fair for us to hold politicians to high moral standards but unfair not to acknowledge that they, unlike most of us, must act on their beliefs in a very public way. The simplest way to keep one's hands clean is never to enter the fray at all, which is what most of the rest of us do. Not all politicians are noble, but the Church has always regarded the pursuit of the common good as a noble aim. Politicians who take on that extraordinarily difficult task and do so with good will deserve our good will in return, not cynicism and scorn. We have a duty to look at their records with a charitable eye, recognizing and sympathizing with the difficult position with respect to voting in which they so often find themselves. We have a duty not to assume too quickly that they are mistaken in their prudential judgments or being insincere when they express a willingness to seek common ground. We have a duty to acknowledge the genuine constraints imposed by other obligations, such as the duty of a Supreme Court Justice to abide by defensible standards of judicial decision making. The vitriol surrounding the current debate about honorees is deeply at odds with these duties, and the cynicism underlying it has no place in a robust Catholic political culture.

I have not presented an argument that would enable us to draw any straightforward conclusions about whether Notre Dame and Fordham erred by honoring President Obama and Justice Breyer, respectively. My own view is that they did not err. This is in part because I do not think that presenting someone with an honor or honorary degree generates all that much of an association with that person. Certainly, it does not constitute an embrace of everything that they have ever done, said, or thought. I also think that the portrayal of President Obama as the leader of the pro-choice movement and an avid



supporter of abortion was exaggerated for effect by his opponents and reflects the cynicism I denounced in the previous paragraph.<sup>15</sup> But I take seriously the fact that people whose judgment I respect think differently on this matter and that reflective, charitable opposition to honoring President Obama and Justice Breyer is possible. I deny only that it is necessary.

In the end, Catholics are called to bring to the political arena the Church's entire moral arsenal and deploy it as conscientiously as possible in what we surely must grant is a flawed and broken world. We are also called to respect the efforts of other people of good will, Catholic or not, similarly engaged in the project of mending and restoring human dignity in such a world. In the opening lines of *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI describes love as "an extraordinary force which leads people to opt for courageous and generous engagement in the field of justice and peace."<sup>16</sup> Courage and generosity are not at odds; we can have the courage of our convictions while remaining generous to those who reject those convictions. Reflection on the history of our country's moral development should make us both humble about our own powers of discernment but also hopeful for the future. We do not always know what is true, but if we are lucky, in time, we will together find out. Meanwhile, we would do well to proceed in a spirit of gentleness, humility, and, above all, charity.

---

<sup>15</sup> This works both ways—many opponents of awards and honorary degrees to George W. Bush and Alberto Gonzales were guilty of the same offenses.

<sup>16</sup> BENEDICT XVI, ENCYCLICAL LETTER *CARITAS IN VERITATE* ¶ 1 (2009).