

The Little Sisters vs. Notre Dame

On religious liberty, these women have something to teach the Fighting Irish.



By

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1 COMMENTS

In the Bing Crosby classic “The Bells of St. Mary’s,” a nun teaches a bullied boy to fight back, even though she herself believes in turning the other cheek.

This coming Saturday, the Little Sisters of the Poor have an opportunity to do the same. Two weeks ago, the Sisters were in the Supreme Court battling the Obama administration’s contraceptive mandate. This weekend, they will be at Notre Dame to accept an award from the Center for Ethics and Culture for their work upholding the worth and dignity of every human life.

Perhaps while on campus, the Little Sisters could take a page from Hollywood—and put some fight back into the Fighting Irish.



ENLARGE

Sister Mary Benedict (Ingrid Bergman) gives a boxing lesson in 'The Bells of St. Mary's' (1945).PHOTO: RKO

The Little Sisters are front and center in the challenge to the Affordable Care Act mandate that requires them to change their health-care plan to offer employees contraceptives, sterilization procedures and abortion-inducing drugs—all contrary to Catholic teaching. The Little Sisters argue the administration is forcing them to choose between their faith and the loving care they provide men and women too old or too poor to care for themselves.

Notre Dame faces the same mandate. There, alas, the similarities end.

At the heart of the government's case is a phony accommodation for objecting nonprofits. All it wants from the Little Sisters or Notre Dame, it says, is a signed "opt-out."

In fact, the notice the Obama administration demands is not an opt-out (which the Little Sisters would happily sign) but the legal authorization to have their health plan commandeered. Remember, if the federal government wanted to distribute contraceptives on its own, there would be no Supreme Court fight.

The fight has been joined for two reasons. First, the Obama administration insists on having these contraceptives distributed through the Little Sisters' own plan. Second, it has at the same time underestimated the pluck and mettle of these women.

For even with courts ruling against them and the threat of fines of \$70 million a year, the Little Sisters consistently refused to bend.

And Notre Dame? Big ol' shake-down-the-thunder Notre Dame, with its \$10 billion endowment? Under pressure, the Irish signed.

It wasn't the only mixed signal. In July 2013, when the White House announced its final rules for its fake accommodation, most objectors who had their earlier suits dismissed because they were not ripe simply refiled. But Notre Dame dithered, and didn't refile until just three weeks before the mandate's requirements were to take effect. Then, after losing at the appellate level, it failed to seek Supreme Court review and relief.

Is it any wonder that some observers, such as the trial judge who heard the case, say Notre Dame's actions suggest it doesn't really believe what it claims it believes?

Cue to the more recent announcement from Notre Dame that it will bestow on Joe Biden its Laetare Medal, the oldest award in American Catholicism. Not only does Vice President Biden have a long and loud public record in opposition to Catholic teaching on abortion and marriage, he is the second-highest official in an administration that Notre Dame has accused in court of forcing it to "violate its own conscience."

Mr. Biden will receive the Laetare at commencement alongside former House Speaker John Boehner, a Republican. In choosing the duo, Notre Dame's president, Father John Jenkins, says the school is striking a blow against the "toxic political environment."

Presumably contributors to our toxic environment include the local bishop, who has spoken out against the award. For Notre Dame is doing the one thing the bishops have asked Catholic institutions not to do: give those who act in defiance of the church's fundamental moral principles "awards, honors or platforms which would suggest support for their actions."

How thoroughly Obamalike Notre Dame has been here, coupling an in-your-face award with the suggestion that anyone who has an argument to the contrary must be uncivil. On top of this, the university gets a prince of the church—Washington's Cardinal Donald Wuerl—to come out for an honorary degree, providing an imprimatur that effectively big-foots the local bishop and, as the National Catholic Reporter gleefully notes, undermines the bishops' own 2004 statement on Catholics in public life.

And the intellectual defense of the claim that Mr. Biden's "genius," as the Laetare news release puts it, has "illustrated the ideals of the Church"? That there is no connection between a politician and his policy record.

All in all, it's a sad message Notre Dame sends: Principles are a fine thing—just don't let them get in the way of a comfortable place in society.

The good news is, the Little Sisters do not punt. And if freedom does prevail over this mandate, it will be in good part because these women put it all on the line when others—far wealthier and better connected—took the road more timid.

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