

FR JOHN JENKINS

'You can't be a Catholic if you are not ecumenical'

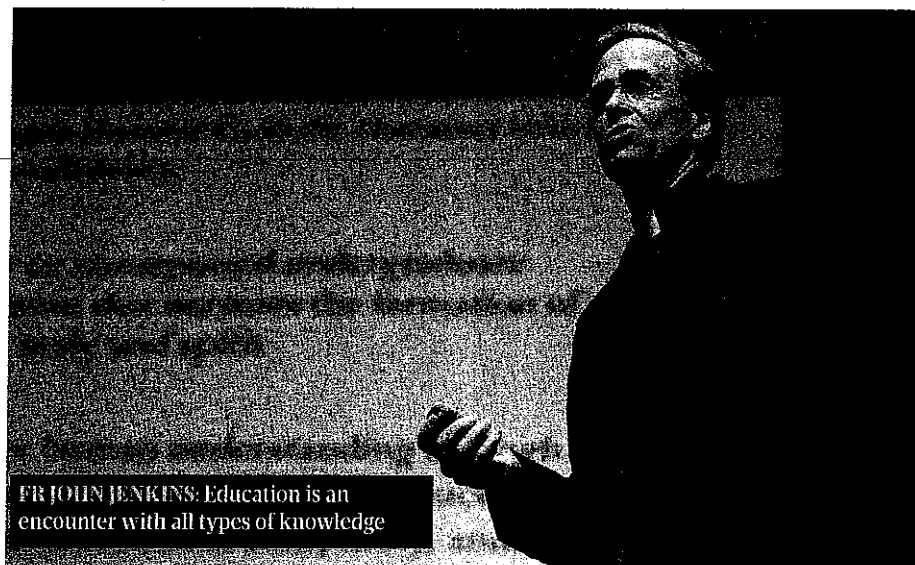
The president of one of the foremost US Catholic universities tells Michael Sean Winters how he is working to create a 'rich sense of what a Catholic university should be'

FR JOHN Jenkins CSC, the president of the University of Notre Dame in the United States since 2005, has a unique distinction. He is the only person to have awarded President Barack Obama an honorary degree and to have subsequently sued Mr Obama's Administration over an edict on contraception that is part of the President's health-care reform. It is not the kind of distinction the self-effacing Fr Jenkins sought.

The decision to invite Mr Obama to address the university's graduating class of 2009 and receive the honorary degree touched off a firestorm because of Mr Obama's support for abortion. Archbishop Charles Chaput, then of Denver and now in Philadelphia, said Notre Dame was "prostituting [its] Catholic identity by appeals to phony dialogue that mask an abdication of our moral witness".

The decision to sue the Administration over its requirement that employers, including Catholic educational institutions, fund contraception insurance for employees earned applause from those who criticised the honorary degree. Conversely, many of those who applauded inviting Mr Obama to the graduation ceremony were surprised the school entered the legal fray over the contraception mandate. Few applauded both decisions.

In a recent interview, I asked Fr Jenkins what he makes of his odd distinction and if he has any regrets. "I am proud we gave President Obama an honorary degree," Fr Jenkins said. "He is an impressive person. He was the first African-American elected President." Fr Jenkins said that although he and his school opposed the contraception mandate, Catholic Social Teaching had long held that universal access to health care is a fundamental human right and that Mr Obama's



FR JOHN JENKINS: Education is an encounter with all types of knowledge

effort to promote health-care reform was a worthy effort. "Besides," he added, "personally, the President is a warm and generous person."

Fr Jenkins also makes no apologies for the lawsuit. In an earlier interview, when the suit was filed, he told me that he thought the contraception mandate violated the integrity of the university's mission and he still believes that. "But we think of these lawsuits as high-brow brawls and that is not quite right," he told me. "I reject the idea that we have to demonise our opponents in a public policy debate. This is how we resolve certain types of problems in this country, in the courts."

Fr Jenkins knows that both situations have less to do with him than they do with Notre Dame's iconic place in the landscape of Catholic higher education in the United States.

There are larger Catholic institutions, such as DePaul University in Chicago, and there are older ones, such as Georgetown in Washington DC. But, for a variety of reasons, when Americans think of Catholic higher education, they think of Notre Dame.

The film, *Knute Rockne, All American*, about a football player and coach at the university, was a box-office hit when it premiered in 1940. Notre Dame's football team continues to play a big role in the university's public identity – it is the only university to have all its games televised nationally – and in 2013 its team vied for the national championship again, a trophy that no other university has claimed more times.

Fr Theodore Hesburgh, who led the university from 1952 until 1987, was one of the

nation's foremost academic leaders, a civil-rights champion, the first priest to serve on Harvard's governing board and, in 1962, he made the cover of *Time* magazine, a signal mark of public stature.

During his tenure, Notre Dame went from a small liberal arts school in rural Indiana to a top-ranked research university. The university is ranked joint eighteenth on *US News & World Report's* much-watched list of best colleges, the highest-ranking for any Catholic university. The only other Catholic universities to crack the top 50 on the list are Georgetown and Boston College. Notre Dame's endowment of \$8.2 billion (£4.82bn) (donated funds that a school invests to support its spending) dwarfs all but a handful of universities, such as Harvard and Yale. By way of comparison, the Catholic University of America's endowment stands at around \$300 million (£176m).

Fr Jenkins has proved to be a successful fund-raiser at a time when being a university president increasingly focuses on fund-raising, telling me: "Education is expensive, especially at the highest level. It is a people-intensive, talent-intensive effort. You can't mechanise education. You can't outsource the work. You want to keep class sizes small so students can interact with faculty. And a variety of costs to support students, such as health services, are now expected."

One year's tuition at Notre Dame is now \$46,237 (£27,178), but more than 50 per cent of students receive some form of help. "We try to provide financial aid so that the university is accessible to all," Fr Jenkins said.

IN THE MID-TWENTIETH century, university presidents did not spend all their time fund-raising - they served as public intellectuals for the nation. But no university president has functioned in that role since A. Bartlett Giamatti stepped down as president of Yale in 1986. I asked Fr Jenkins why that was. "It is a good question," he replied. "I am not sure what the answer is. I wonder if, in our current environment, our public life is so fractious, and everyone gets dragged down into the political mud, university leaders may shun public debate. Back in the 1950s, it seems that clerics and university presidents could stay above the fray."

He pointed to his own experience of dealing with critics of Mr Obama's 2009 speech on campus as evidence of the phenomenon, saying: "Now, if you make a statement on immigration or abortion or the poor, you get cast into a partisan role and a partisan battle. There is a tribe mentality. If someone on 'my team' says something stupid, I am still expected to defend them."

Fr Jenkins is allergic to the "culture wars" afflicting so many in the US Church, which is one of the reasons his concern for the "Catholic identity" of Notre Dame runs deeper than a debate about graduation speakers. "It is no accident that universities grew out of

the medieval, Catholic culture," he said. "God created the world and he created us in his image. This leads to an intellectual commitment, doesn't it?" He thinks it is a university's job to "reconcile intellectual enquiry with faith, to wrestle with the questions that arise, not avoid them. One of the orthodoxies in some quarters is that intellectual enquiry and commitment to faith are not compatible. Notre Dame's mission is to prove that wrong."

Fr Jenkins is resistant to the alternative orthodoxy that says a Catholic university exists merely to enunciate church teaching. "We can't just say, 'Here is the doctrine', and then make students repeat it. We have to ask, 'How do we

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understand this?' Students have to grapple with these issues whether they are studying economics or biology. The goal, for me, is a rich sense of what a Catholic university should be."

One instance of this "rich sense" of what a Catholic university should be is discerned in Notre Dame becoming home to some of the leading

US evangelical scholars, such as Mark Noll and George Marsden. "This was part of integrating the vision of Vatican II," Fr Jenkins said. "An ecumenical perspective is not optional ... You can't be Catholic if you are not ecumenical. I hope non-Catholics feel at home here, and I think they do." He also notes that Catholic higher education, committed to high-level research and faith perspectives, has few competitors among Protestant universities.

In Fr Jenkins' vision for Notre Dame, and for Catholic higher education more generally, the "culture of encounter" about which Pope Francis speaks so frequently is not just a method, it is a goal. Pope Francis has not been shy about insisting that Catholics, especially clergy, need to be less comfortable and more willing "to make a mess". Fr Jenkins becomes animated when we discuss the effect that Francis is having on the student body. "He is such a vibrant personality," he said. "Even those students who are uncomfortable with the Church - the way young people can be - they are responding to him."

Fr Jenkins' critics may think he has made a mess at Notre Dame, that his invitation to Mr Obama betrayed an indifference to the university's Catholic identity. They accuse the university of pandering to gays by launching a campaign that explicitly paired the school's Catholic identity with its welcoming attitude towards gay and lesbian students. Some have complained that the theology faculty is insufficiently orthodox. But Fr Jenkins' ideas about education being an encounter with all types of knowledge, seen through the prism of Catholic faith, seems to better approximate the Pope's vision than that of Jenkins' critics.

This quiet man will pursue his vision for the nation's flagship Catholic university, and now, it seems, he has the wind at his back.

Michael Sean Winters writes for *The Tablet* from Washington DC.