"Another View"

Op-Ed essays

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Even a pope has a right to free speech

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CENTER VALLEY – Among the sacred rights we Americans cherish is the right to free speech, which enables the expression of divergent, even opposing views, without fear of reprisal or recrimination. Whether in the form of professing one’s opinion or protesting another’s, the opportunity to speak freely remains foundational to civil society.

But what happened recently in Italy strikes directly at this cultural cornerstone. Last month Pope Benedict XVI canceled an appearance at a Roman university (La Sapienza), where he had been invited to offer a public lecture for the inauguration of the academic year. Protestors had created an “inopportune climate” for his visit, and the pope decided it prudent not to stir the cauldron of criticism any further. Yet his absence did just that, as it should.

Not surprisingly, a band of professors incited the protest. Leading the charge was Marcello Cini, a physicist, who held to the view “that his visit was ambiguous and an attack on the independence of culture and the university.” The opposition based its militant view on a speech then Cardinal Ratzinger gave, in which he quoted an Austrian philosopher’s claim that the Church’s “verdict against Galileo was rational and just.”

Ironies abound in this story, each of which should also sound a cultural alarm. The first concerns the source that ignited the ire of the 67 professors and the 1,479 others who subsequently signed on in protest. The speech from which the quote was lifted was one given in 2005 at the very same university. Even worse, as reported by L’Osservatore Romano, had the quote been appreciated in its
proper context, and not simply lifted from a Wikipedia entry, it would be evident that Cardinal Ratzinger referenced it as a counterpoint to his thesis that “Faith does not grow from resentment and the rejection of rationality, but from its fundamental affirmation, and from being rooted in a still greater form of reason.”

A greater irony surfaces in the pope’s acquiescence to the protest. Rare anywhere, the cancellation of a papal visit was particularly odd for that university and without precedent in Italy’s history. The university’s rector, Renato Guarini, called it “a defeat for the freedom of expression” at an institution originally founded by a pope (Boniface VIII in 1303). Then prime minister Romano Prodi lamented that “No voice should be stifled in our country, least of all the pope’s.” And several commentators noted that while the voice of the contemporary papacy is one heard round the world, the lone place it was forced into silence was in the pope’s own city.

Perhaps the greatest irony lies in the speech itself. Though not delivered orally, the pope did send a copy of the text as a courtesy. The summary title reads: “I come not to impose faith but to solicit courage for the truth.” Its content explores the question of what role a pope might play in the work of a university, whose “true intimate origin” can be found “in the craving for knowledge that is proper to human beings.” Universities have long stood as a privileged place for pursuing this innate search for meaning, yet professors and students alike now grapple with the question of whether the truth of things means more than simply knowledge about them. For the pope, as for great thinkers throughout history, “The purpose of knowing the truth is to know what is good,” that which is ultimately meaningful and beneficial for human beings. In this light, “Responsiveness to the truth always takes the back seat to partisan interests” – except for a minority of clamorous professors and their disciples in dissent.

Notwithstanding these ironies, it goes without saying that professors can and should raise their voices in protest when the occasion warrants it, and students do well to learn when and how to engage in social activism. But what remains unfortunate, and what portends an insidious shift toward the antithesis of a university education, is when such protests focus on who is speaking rather than on what is said. To deny the floor to an accomplished professor in his own right, and a spokesman for humanity in the world’s eyes, is to decide a priori that some thoughts should not be voiced.

No one is forced to agree with his words, or even listen to them. But if we cherish our own, then even the pope has a right to free speech.