



LIFE MATTERS

The Newsletter of the Respect Life Office of the Diocese of Rockford
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Does it matter?

by Patricia Pitkus Bainbridge

While hockey is my favorite sport, I like football—especially college football. As both a student and then professor at Michigan State University I never missed a home game and went to as many away games as possible.

I was in attendance at the “game of the century”—the 10-10 tie game at Spartan Stadium between first-ranked Notre Dame and second-ranked Michigan State in 1966. I even traveled to Pasadena for MSU’s appearances in the 1965 and 1988 Rose Bowl.

I still follow the game today although not as fervently as I once did. Each fall, the MSU flag flies prominently above our garage door. Anyone who knows me knows I’m a Michigan State fan and that the two games that continue to garner my interest are against State’s two biggest rivals—Michigan and Notre Dame. These rivalries can still be fun—even for us senior citizens.



While I certainly no longer follow all the statistics, records, players, and coaches like I did years ago, I still know a little about the game and I am especially interested in the Big Ten teams as well as Notre Dame.

New coach at Notre Dame

In early December of this year a friend alerted me to the rumor that Notre Dame was looking at Brian Kelly (head football coach at the University of Cincinnati) to replace the fired Charlie Weis. The rumor became fact on December 10th (just 10 days after the Weis firing) when Notre Dame’s athletic director, Jack Swarbrick, announced that Kelly had indeed been named to what many consider the most prestigious coaching position in all of college football.

At first glance, Kelly seemed like a great match for Notre Dame. There is no doubt that he is a

skilled coach. He had a great record at Cincinnati and the Bearcats will be going to the Sugar Bowl. He was described in the media as “the Irish Catholic coach” who attended “Assumption College, a Catholic school in Worcester (Massachusetts)”.

But when accusations that Kelly is pro-choice for abortion began to appear in respected media outlets and the blogosphere, some began to question Notre Dame’s choice for its new head coach. If, and I do mean, *if* Kelly is pro-choice for abortion, it would be a serious error in judgment for Notre Dame to have hired him. But, it wouldn’t be the first serious error in judgment that has been made at Notre Dame.

Sports writers weigh in

Brian Bennett of ESPN writes that Swarbrick thought the abortion issue “was completely irrelevant to the hiring of a football coach.” David Haugh of the *Chicago Tribune* writes that Kelly’s “stance on abortion” is a “ridiculous question no football coach should have to answer.”



One sports columnist, Steve Gorchs, of the *Post Tribune* identifies himself as “growing up Catholic” but just can’t believe anyone would care about Brian Kelly’s views on abortion.

Interestingly, both Haugh and Gorchs believe that a 2004 incident at Central Michigan University (Kelly’s coaching position before going to Cincinnati) must be addressed. Several of Kelly’s players were charged with perjury and obstruction of justice in their attempt to protect a teammate in the beating death of 26-year-old Demarcus Graham. Kelly initially excused their behavior but later apologized after being reprimanded by the President of CMU.

Gorchs writes that it “matters” that he had “discipline issues with players breaking laws

outside of football” at CMU. Haugh writes, “duty requires [Swarbrick] ask Kelly to explain the Central Michigan incident.”

Apparently, *some* moral issues matter to sports writers and the athletic director at Notre Dame. According to Swarbrick, Kelly “brought up the Central Michigan topic” in his interview. Swarbrick said Kelly takes these things “head-on.”

Although Swarbrick didn’t ask and Kelly didn’t bring it up, the abortion “topic” was brought up by at least one reporter. Kelly, however, did not answer the abortion question “head-on.” Instead, he said: “I’m a practicing Catholic. I embrace the same values that are here at Notre Dame. I can tell you this. I’m pro Notre Dame. I’m pro football. That’s about it.” When asked where all the “pro-choice” questions came from, Gorches reports “Kelly just shrugged” and said, “How do I know? It’s cool to be Catholic. I’ve spoken at the Catholic (Men’s Conference) in front of 3,000 in Cincinnati. Those are things I can’t control, somebody wants to write something like that. You just tell them who you are and what you’re about.”

Not exactly a forthcoming answer.

Practicing Catholics

Let’s not forget that Vice President Joe Biden, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, Representative Patrick Kennedy, coach Rick Majerus and many other pro-abortion individuals describe themselves as “practicing Catholics”.

I really want to give Kelly the benefit of the doubt but with a response like that, it raises more questions than it answers. If he is pro-life, it would have been a perfect opportunity to set the record straight, by replying, “I’m pro Notre Dame. I’m pro football.” AND, I’m pro-life. It would have been so simple, but he didn’t do it. Is that proof that he is pro-choice for abortion? No. But it certainly doesn’t cause me to think otherwise.

Does it really matter?

Here’s the question. Does it really matter if a head football coach is pro-choice for abortion? Yes, it matters on a number of levels. First, it matters because if he expresses it publicly, it would be a source of scandal. Secondly, it matters because even if he never expresses it

publicly, if a player came to him for advice on a wife or girlfriend’s unexpected pregnancy, the coach might offer advice that could result in the death of an unborn baby. Thirdly, it matters because of the effect it might have on the soul of the coach or those his views influence.

In all honesty, I would hope that anyone who is in a position of leadership with young people would respect the dignity of all human beings including the pre-born. That being said, I know that in our present age, it is not a realistic expectation. However, it *should* be realistic in Catholic institutions. The head coach at Notre Dame is often the face of Notre Dame. Like other high profile individuals, his words and actions have disproportionate influence on our culture.

If a coach who calls himself Catholic takes a position that is contrary to the authentic moral teachings of the Church, there is potential for scandal. Coaches are often looked upon as father figures to their players. If he sees nothing wrong with abortion or if he dissents from other Church teaching, his players may do likewise.

What if Michigan State did the same?

Would I be so concerned if Michigan State hired a new head football coach who was pro-choice for abortion? Certainly I would not be pleased. However, Michigan State does not claim to represent traditional values. It is a state university and while I personally would be concerned about the coach’s influence on his players, the student body in general, and the alums, it would not be hypocritical or scandal for Michigan State to hire a head football coach who has views not in line with Catholic moral teachings. The same thing cannot be said for Notre Dame.

Michigan State does not claim allegiance to nor is it expected to follow the teachings of the Catholic Church— Notre Dame *does* and *is!*

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