

On November 5, 2009, the American Irish Historical Society in New York awarded its 2009 Gold Medal to Father John Jenkins, C.S.C., President of the University of Notre Dame, South Bend, IN. Following is Fr. Jenkins' speech when he accepted the award.

American Irish Historical Society
New York City
November 5, 2009
Rev. John I. Jenkins, C.S.C

Thank you, Dr. Cahill, for that kind introduction, and thank you for your inspired leadership of the American Irish Historical Society. For you, the Society is a family commitment, and so I also thank your son, Christopher Cahill, who is its executive director. The American Irish Historical Society is more than a monument to the contributions of Irish-Americans; it's a living force for a better future. Thank you, Dr. Cahill and Christopher, for your service to this cause.

I also want to thank Pat Keough, tonight's dinner chairman, who has worked very hard to make this the marvelous evening it has been. And, continuing the very Irish theme of family, I want to recognize Pat's father Donald Keough, a past winner of this award, legendary COO of Coca-Cola, former chairman of Notre Dame's Board of Trustees, and a personal friend and mentor to me. Don Keough, a great Irish-American, has joined with Martin Naughton, a great Irishman, to establish the Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies at the University of Notre Dame. When Don and Martin met in Ireland to begin discussing their venture, Martin playfully but poignantly said to Don, who is part of the great Irish diaspora, "Welcome home. Where have you been for so long?"

It's an honor to be here at the Society's 112th dinner, and to receive the Gold Medal Award. The Bible tells us "it is more blessed to give than to receive." But, as you may have heard, our decision to give the President an honorary degree at Notre Dame's Commencement last Spring created quite a stir. Our Commencement -- and this event tonight -- have shown me that in the arena of honors and awards, it can be a lot easier to receive than to give.

I am truly grateful to be given the Gold Medal, especially in light of the others who've received it in the past. But I believe the honor really belongs to the University I'm privileged to serve.

As it happens, no one really knows for sure how Notre Dame – a University founded by a French priest in a remote part of Indiana – became universally linked with the Irish.

All we have is conjectures. But that's the Irish way, isn't it? We never let the truth get in the way of a good story.

It's true that four of the six religious who founded Notre Dame in 1842 with the Frenchman Edward Sorin were Irish; that nearly all Fr. Sorin's successors claim Irish descent; and that the student body has always had a strong Irish presence.

As I mentioned, we now have at Notre Dame have the Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies, with very distinguished scholars of Irish language, literature, history, and society. Today Notre Dame is the largest center for the study of the Irish language outside Dublin, and we have an international study program in Ireland. Above all, Notre Dame was shaped, and still is, by the deep thirst for learning of the Irish people.

We also try to instill in our students a resilient hope in response to whatever challenges the world presents, and there could hardly be a more Irish trait than resilience, or rising above adversity. And so at Notre Dame, whether we're of Asian, African, European or Latino ancestry – we're proud to call ourselves the Fighting Irish.

During the Teens and Twenties, stereotypes and ethnic slurs were openly expressed against immigrants, Catholics and the Irish. The first use of the "Fighting

Irish” for Notre Dame football was in a Michigan newspaper, and it was intended as an insult.

Yet some of the students began using the “Fighting Irish” nickname as a way to turn the derisive taunt into an expression of triumph. They came to cherish the nickname, and they transformed it into a symbol of pride.

The Fighting Irish name had been embraced by some and opposed by others when, in a student magazine in 1919, a letter appeared from an alumnus who criticized the nickname because, he said, many players were not of Irish descent. Others rushed to defend the phrase, with one alumnus declaring: “You don’t have to be from Ireland to be Irish!”

The Twenties was also the Knute Rockne era, when the Notre Dame football team first put the small private school on the national map. Rockne was Norwegian, but he had the Irish flair for storytelling and drama. A natural salesman, he and his student press agents began using the “Fighting Irish” nickname to characterize the underdog tenacity and never-say-die spirit of his teams.

Finally in 1927, University president Fr. Matthew Walsh officially endorsed the nickname, saying: “The university authorities are in no way averse to the name ‘Fighting Irish’ as applied to our athletic teams....I sincerely hope that we may always be worthy of the ideal embodied in the term ‘Fighting Irish.’

That ideal was eloquently described by Ireland’s President Mary McAleese at Notre Dame’s Commencement in 2006: “The language you use here, the “Fighting Irish” ... what we actually mean mostly when we talk about it is an indomitable spirit, a commitment, never tentative, always fully committed, to life itself.... that’s really the spirit of the Fighting Irish.”

The spirit of the Fighting Irish is as good an explanation as any why this small island – and those who came from it – have had such a big impact on the world. The riches of the Irish, the sources of their strength, are simply in the virtues and character of Ireland's people.

I came to know these virtues through my very Irish mother, Helen Condon, and her very Irish mother, Julia Ford Condon. My mother has an unwavering belief in the surpassing importance of family, friendships, and community. She cannot get enough of family. She had 12 children. Now, at age 80, she enjoys the company not only of her twelve children, but of 42 grandchildren and 9 great-grandchildren, each of whom she considers the brightest, most beautiful child she has ever met.

Our home was always full of life, activity, games, and laughter. It was also crowded, chaotic, and full of the usual squabbles of children. Often someone would suggest that it would perhaps have been prudent to have a family of a more reasonable size. She would think a bit, nod, and reply, "You may be right. But who would we do without?"

My mother was also a person of deep faith. In fact, her faith was in some ways an extension of her belief in the value of family and community, for her friendship with God was simply the friendship that anchored every other relationship. My mother was a very practical person, and so, when faced with a major challenge or difficulty, she did the most practical thing she could think of: she prayed.

She had ample opportunity to draw on the power of prayer. My mother grew up on a farm, and when she was eight her father was crushed by a thrashing machine. Her mother, my grandmother, was left with three young children to raise. She was forced to sell the farm and used the proceeds to start an upholstery store. Her partner fled with the money. She had to begin again, and worked in a hospital to support the family. She never made much money, but she gave my mother more than enough of the things that mattered. And she raised three successful children.

When my grandmother, toward the end of her life, came to live with us, I did not hear a single complaint about it from her, or from my mother.

In spite of all hardship, it had been a good life.

For me, these family stories capture the character of our people. We are the friendly Irish, who cultivate community and friendship; the Irish of faith, who are committed to prayer; and the fighting Irish, who rise above adversity and meet challenges with hope. For most all of us here of Irish blood, these are the only treasures our ancestors were able to take with them from their homes in Ireland. Luckily, nothing more was needed.

As we spend an evening savoring what is special and distinctive about the Irish, it is good to recognize that all these aspects of Irish character are truly gifts of *human* character -- that divisions of race, region, religion are not enduring; that each of us was created by God for *union* with God; and the greatest of all fighting Irish are those fighting for peace.

Today, in Northern Ireland, the two sides are working to complete the process of devolution and transfer responsibility for the police and courts from Westminster in London to Northern Ireland. This is the last big policy hurdle to peace. Just two weeks ago, First Minister Peter Robinson and Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness met with British leaders in London. Prime Minister Brown announced funding to support devolution. Conservative party leader David Cameron said the Tories would honor the funding should they win the next elections. When the Deputy First Minister met with David Cameron, it was the first time a senior Republican leader has met a Tory leader since 1921.

This progress to end division in the land of our ancestors should inspire our hopes for unity here in America.

These are difficult times for the United States. No matter what is said about ivory towers, a University is never separate from the country it calls home, and the troubles facing America are a concern of mine as President of Notre Dame.

So, in the spirit of evolution that defines the history of the "Fighting Irish" nickname, tonight I'd like to continue transforming its meaning. Today, the world needs a new understanding of what it means to fight for your beliefs. We have enough angry conflict and violence. The way ahead must be through dialogue that, however passionate, remains civil.

In my view, the most worrisome challenge the country faces today is the loss of respect for one another: the sarcasm, the contempt, the demonizing of one another in public debate. This is far more dangerous than any policy challenge because it attacks the immune system of our society. It diminishes our ability to identify threats, agree on a plan, and take action.

Civil dialogue, on the other hand, is completely different. It is marked by many acts of courtesy and gestures of respect, by listening carefully and speaking honestly. If you aim to persuade someone, you're hoping they will see something in a way they've never seen it before. A mind sees something new only when it is open, and it is open only when it is unthreatened.

My deepest wish for my country is that we can find a sense of unity. I am not talking about the brittle unity that is found in momentary agreements, or by postponing difficult choices or avoiding controversial issues. I'm talking about a durable unity that can survive the diversity of our views – a unity that comes from a deeply felt obligation to show respect to one another, and not to give way to hatred or contempt when challenging a policy or position that we oppose. Those of us who share a Catholic faith should have an advantage in engaging people with difference – we believe all human beings are made in the likeness of God. So we should engage

one another always with respect for the human beings before us – out of respect for their Creator.

If, in today's political climate, this message seems out of touch, perhaps we are the ones that have lost touch, because this is the teaching of our faith -- the faith we received from our parents, who received it from their ancestors, who received it from St. Patrick. As a boy, Patrick was kidnapped from Britain and brought to Ireland as a slave. After he returned home, he came back to Ireland not with anger and resentment, but with this teaching – that the greatest commandment is to love God and to love our neighbor – especially when that love is not returned. There are many ways to cherish our Irish roots. Honoring this teaching, in my view, is the highest.

Thank you, and God bless you all.