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'Monologues' not compatible with goals

Observer Viewpoint

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While I could comment on the proper application of truth and academic freedom involved in Father John Jenkins' limiting of "The Vagina Monologues" on campus, I wish to focus upon why I believe that the "Monologues" is compatible neither with the Catholic faith nor with its organizers' own goals. As Jenkins stated in his speech to students, there are plenty of noble objectives underlying the V-Day movement. These include the elimination of violence against women and upholding the value of womanhood and female sexuality. As has been stated, I think all sides can agree that the preeminent goals of stopping violence against women and helping victimized women to heal need to be taken seriously and strongly promoted. The Catholic stance is overwhelmingly in favor of this agenda.

However, the means by which the "Monologues" attempts to achieve these goals suffers from an incredibly dangerous flaw - it helps to fuel and perpetuate a masculine view of women as sexual objects rather than as dignified persons to be equally respected and protected. It does so by portraying the female performers precisely as sexual things whose personhood can be equated with their vaginas. I understand that many women feel that the play is a form of art that enables a cathartic emotional release on the part of women who have been victimized and need to find a sense of security and community. Nonetheless, the manner in which this is achieved only serves to entrench participants even further within a culture of sexual commodity.

Why do you suppose so many men attend the "Monologues?" None of them, I would imagine, are seeking the healing from the play that many female viewers desire to receive. And I would wager that a relatively small number of the men attend solely out of deep feelings of empathy for the plight of victimized women. Rather, I am willing to assert - and plenty of my male friends agree - that many, many guys are attracted to the "Monologues" for its patently risqué nature. The play may not be intended as pornographic or heteroerotic, but a voyeuristic male mentality can be aroused by even the most innocent or artistic immodesty, not to mention graphic sexual descriptions and depictions.

The women associated with the "Monologues" have to understand that the content of the play caters to the base sexual passions of male viewers, and so only encourages us to think of women as sexual toys. I'm sure nearly all male viewers on campus are opposed to violence against women, but the play does not offer us an outlet whereby we can begin to treat women as they are - equally intelligent human persons with graceful souls and beautiful bodies that must be honored and cherished. Even if only women were involved in the production and viewing of the "Monologues," they would be damaging their own struggle to gain a dignified image in society. This is because the play teaches women to think and act in such a manner that will cause men to believe that women really want to be perceived merely as attractive flesh defined by sexual experiences.

For these reasons, the Monologues do not offer true freedom to women; instead, women are unwittingly enslaving themselves to the oversexed and self-gratifying culture that urges men to shun the responsibility and commitment that women so earnestly desire from them.

Therefore, many of us at the University of Notre Dame will not endorse the "Monologues." But we are still more than willing to lend our efforts in stopping violence against women from a Catholic approach. Like Christ, the Church is countercultural - "a sign that will be contradicted" (Lk 2:34) by the world in all ages. It is relatively unpopular and inconvenient to live out Catholicism today, but the Church's teaching on human persons has the good and truth of the body and interpersonal relationships in mind.

Female persons should never be denigrated as trivial possessions to be used, but this will become a reality only if we promote a model imploring men to respect and be thankful for "women as they have come forth from the heart of God, in all the beauty and richness of their femininity" (John Paul II). And the healing of wronged women will be most fulfilling if they are treated with the reverential deference that femininity deserves.

The Church tries to say to each woman, "You are not merely a body that needs to be liberated, but a complete person who must be loved." Hopefully, both sides can and will work together to advance this feminine model on campus.

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