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An open letter to Father John Jenkins

Letter to the Editor

Posted: 4/11/06

I write to object to your decision to permit the continued regular production of "The Vagina Monologues" on our campus. I write in this public manner to alert our faculty, colleagues and our treasured students that not all members of the Congregation of Holy Cross, to which we belong, endorse your decision. Speaking for myself, I find the decision deeply damaging to Notre Dame and its mission as a Catholic university. It is a decision that I beg you to reconsider and to reverse.

When you were appointed president of Notre Dame there was hope that you might address and reverse the attenuation and drift in our Catholic mission that characterized our recent past. My own hope was that you would address urgently such crucial issues as faculty hiring, the development of a curriculum that truly conveys the richness of the Catholic intellectual tradition to our students and the insidious effects on teaching and learning of the increasing corporate ethos at Notre Dame. For whatever reasons, you chose to place your initial emphasis on the regular production and sponsorship by elements of the university of "The Vagina Monologues" and "The Queer Film Festival." You put forth the position that "an event which has the implicit or explicit sponsorship of the university as a whole, or one of its units, or a university-recognized organization, and which either is or appears to be in name or content clearly and egregiously contrary to or inconsistent with the fundamental values of a Catholic university, should not be allowed at Notre Dame." This was a position of such obvious good sense that I never considered that you would retreat from it. Sadly, you have done precisely that.

In asking why you would reverse a sound position, which you obviously had reached after much thought and prayer, one must conclude that you were influenced by those contributors to the debate who favored the continued production of "The Vagina Monologues." Presumably, you were influenced by the young women who produce this play and somehow see it as a contribution to the prevention of violence against women. Undoubtedly, you were influenced by the convictions of certain senior Arts and Letters faculty that any restriction on this play would damage our academic "reputation" - and especially among those "preferred peer schools" whose regard we crave. Whatever the reasons, I must tell you that your decision is being portrayed as involving your "backing down." Indeed, it is hard to understand it in any other terms.

You must know that in taking this decision you have brought most joy to those who care least about Notre Dame's Catholic mission. You have won for yourself a certain short-term popularity with some students and certain faculty but have done real damage to our beloved school and its distinct place in American higher education. By your decision you move us further along the dangerous path where we ape our secular peers and take all our signals from them. Knowing you and having conversed with you on matters relating to Notre Dame's Catholic mission in the past, I suspect that you recognize this in your own heart. Yet, you seemingly have let the possibility of some protest cause you to back off your own stated position. You were called to be courageous and you settled for being popular. This is not your best self. This is not genuine leadership.

In your recent "Closing Statement" you reveal a level of naiveté about the process of a Catholic university engaging the broad culture that is striking and deeply harmful to our purpose as a Catholic university. We live at a time, as Yale Law School professor Stephen Carter pointed out some years ago, when the elite culture is programmed to trivialize religion. Furthermore, much of popular culture is deeply antithetical to religious conviction and practice. It offers a worldview completely at odds with any Catholic vision. It is a worldview from which none of us can be sequestered and, indeed, many of our students arrive here far more deeply influenced by the reigning culture than by faith convictions.

Amidst this larger context you are ready to permit the continued production and promotion of a play which, as our colleague Paolo Carroza rightly put it, "seems to reduce the meaning and value of women's lives to their sexual experiences and organs, reinforcing a perspective on the human person that is itself fundamentally a form of violence." Dialogue with this point of view is ridiculous. It should be contested and resisted at Notre Dame but never promoted.

Notre Dame must hold to a higher view of the dignity of women and men. Might I ask that if this play does not meet your criteria of an "expression that is overt and insistent in its contempt for the values and sensibilities of this University," then what would?

My fear is that you have been "spooked" by the fear of negative publicity if you were to "suppress speech on this campus." Here, it seems, you have a special opportunity to rethink your position. Know well that there is much hypocrisy abroad in the American academy on the issue of "academic freedom." Note that NYU had no difficulty recently in suppressing the "free speech" rights of the students who wanted to discuss and display the Danish cartoons. Note that folk at Brown University get by with a "speech code" that bans all "verbal behavior" that may cause "feelings of impotence, anger or disenfranchisement." In the American academy it is only certain kinds of speech that gets protected. And, as Professor Gary Anderson pointed out in his constructive contribution to this debate, a rather narrow range of politically correct views tends to prevail in the faculties of many institutions which influences what that "speech" is. Notre Dame presently has a wider range of perspectives represented than most institutions who are forever prattling on about their diversity. (They are all "diverse" in the same predictable way!)

Please have the confidence to shape Notre Dame into a truly distinct institution. Take up the challenge to clarify for our secular peers that Notre Dame allows - as they do not - "classroom engagement with religious beliefs precisely as religious" (as Brad Gregory put it so well). Reveal to them with the eloquence of which you are capable that the very values and convictions which allow us to consider a whole range of questions that they cannot also necessitate us to restrict the repeated public performance and promotion of works which are deeply offensive to our values.

John, let me commend you for your admirable goal of seeking to find "ways to prevent violence against women." Over my years of teaching and pastoral service at Notre Dame I have sought to encourage my female students to appreciate their innate dignity and to truly respect themselves. I have been blessed to come to know some amazing women whom I now count as dear friends. Drawing on conversations with such women about the circumstances that they find at Notre Dame leads me to suggest that your rather elaborate committee formed to pursue this goal has the whiff of a public relations exercise about it. The painful reality is that much of the violence against women in our society results from a sick view that separates sex from love and genuine relationship, from the commodification of sex, from the portrayal of women as objects, from the blatant refusal of some men to treat women with dignity and respect. Yet how will the committee be able seriously to address such issues when you have approved the continued production of a play that reduces women to body parts? Surely you see the contradiction here? Could I request that this be an early item for consideration by this committee?

What I ask of you in this letter will require you to dig deep into your heart and soul and to re-open a matter of which I am sure you want to be well rid. I suspect you have had moments when you wished never to hear of "The Vagina Monologues" again, and we both know that there are many other important matters to which you must attend. But careful readers of works like George Marsden's "The Soul of the American University" know that similar decisions to yours which conformed religious schools to their secular peers inexorably led them down a dangerous path to the full surrender of their religious mission and identity. Regrettably, places like Georgetown University are well advanced on this course. Don't let us merely follow them. To do so you would be a betrayal of our forebears in Holy Cross. Instead, Notre Dame must lead the way in American Catholic higher education. Please go back to your best self and to your original instincts and position on this matter. Don't embarrass those of us who want to work with you to build a great Catholic university. Lead us.

Know of my prayers for you during this holiest of weeks.

Bill Miscamble, C.S.C.
Associate Professor of History
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