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NATIONAL DESK

Notre Dame's President Allows 'Monologues' and Gay Films

By NEELA BANERJEE; JENNIFER OCHSTEIN CONTRIBUTED REPORTING FROM SOUTH BEND, IND., FOR THIS ARTICLE. (NYT) 590 words

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The University of Notre Dame will continue to allow a gay film festival and the play "Vagina Monologues" on campus, its president announced yesterday. The decision was a sharp turnaround from a speech that the president, the Rev. John I. Jenkins, gave to faculty members and students in January questioning the appropriateness of such events on a Roman Catholic campus.

In the speech, Father Jenkins said he objected to the "graphic descriptions" of sexual experiences in "The Vagina Monologues" and its portrayals of human sexuality outside traditional relationships between men and women. Conservative Catholics said the events, which have been held on campus for several years, contradicted church teachings on sexuality.

After hearing from hundreds of students, faculty members, alumni and administrators in the last 10 weeks, Father Jenkins said he saw "no reason to prohibit performances of 'The Vagina Monologues' on campus." The gay film festival will also continue.

"I am very determined that we not suppress speech on this campus," Father Jenkins said in a statement. "I am also determined that we never suppress or neglect the Gospel that inspired this university."

Several Catholic universities have canceled the play or sent productions off campus in the last year.

Conservative Catholics criticized Father Jenkins's decision. Bishop John M. D'Arcy of the Fort Wayne-South Bend Diocese in Indiana said in a statement that he was "deeply saddened." William Donohue, president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, wrote in an e-mail message that Father Jenkins's "statement is a strained and ultimately failed attempt to reconcile free speech rights with the mission of a Catholic institution."

Patrick J. Reilly, president of the Cardinal Newman Society, a conservative Catholic watchdog group, said: "Either he has radically changed his perspective on 'The Vagina Monologues' or he is entirely ignoring the Catholic identity of Notre Dame. In either case, it smacks of hypocrisy when he made such strong statements weeks ago and is not imposing any restrictions at all now."

Supporters of the play and the film festival in South Bend, Ind., said they were surprised by the reversal, given the strong disapproval Father Jenkins had voiced.

"The decision shows a recognition that these events contribute to the faith life, spirituality and academic life of the university, that there is a lot of merit to them," said Kaitlyn Redfield, a senior who had until this year organized the staging of "The Vagina Monologues."

On a sunny day on the campus, many students endorsed the decision. Stephanie LaBomascus, 22, another senior, said that although she understood the university's need to maintain its Catholic character, she did not believe that the play, which she had seen, threatened it.

Ms. LaBomascus said, "I feel like part of a university atmosphere is openness about topics without feeling like there's a boundary between expressing your Catholicism and talking about sexuality and the human body."

Father Jenkins saw "The Vagina Monologues" in mid-February, and he said yesterday that he still believed that the play's view of sexuality stood in opposition to the church's. He added that panel discussions after the play about its perspectives and Catholic traditions on sexuality were "serious and informed," and apparently put the play in a new light.

"If I didn't learn anything from all this," Father Jenkins said in a telephone interview, "I'd be very disappointed and surprised. What I learned was we do really need to find ways to advance discussion about issues that have to do with women."