

WEEKEND JOURNAL

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Taste – Houses of Worship: A President's Retreat

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At Notre Dame, the Lenten liturgical calendar is still observed. On Ash Wednesday, many foreheads are gray with ashes, no meat is served on Fridays in the dining halls and now, during Holy Week, hundreds of students drag an enormous cross around campus while observing the Stations of the Cross.

Yet Notre Dame's Lenten season has taken on a different character during the past several years, since "The Vagina Monologues" and the Queer Film Festival have been added to the extracurricular calendar. Not surprisingly, many find these performances inappropriate at Notre Dame, given their explicit attacks on central Catholic teachings.

The previous president of Notre Dame, the Rev. Edward "Monk" Malloy, refused to interfere in these events. But Notre Dame's new president, the Rev. John Jenkins, expressed uneasiness with them after he took office last year. He did not ban them outright, though, saying that he would render his final decision after sufficient discussion had taken place. He convened campus-wide meetings for that purpose.

Most campus observers assumed that, given his stated concerns, Father Jenkins would place some restrictions on the play and the film festival. Both Providence College and the Catholic University of America had earlier this year banned "The Vagina Monologues." Father Jenkins's superior in the Holy Cross religious order, to which he belongs, had banned performances of the play at the University of Portland. Bishop John D'Arcy, much respected in the South Bend, Ind., community and much loved by Notre Dame students, had also spoken out against both the play and the festival.

Thus there was a great deal of surprise when, in the days before Holy Week, Father Jenkins announced: "I see no reason to prohibit performances of 'The Vagina Monologues' on campus, and do not intend to do so." As for the film festival, that too will be allowed to continue. Those faculty members who, the week before, had been plotting Father Jenkins's removal from office for even discussing possible restrictions now congratulated him, and his former student critics praised him as a champion of personal freedom.

Although Father Jenkins called his announcement the "Closing Statement," the debate is unlikely to go away. More is at stake than the fairly standard, indeed humdrum, questions about "censorship" and "free speech" on campus: To some of us – and I speak as a Notre Dame professor – Father Jenkins's decision is one more step in a long process of secularization: It has already radically changed the major Protestant universities in this country; it is now proceeding apace at the Catholic ones.

At Notre Dame, this secularization is most evident in the composition of the faculty. While roughly 85% of Notre

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Dame students are Catholic, the percentage of Catholic faculty has dropped precipitously in the past few decades, reaching its current number of barely 50%, and there is no sign that this trend will be reversed. More important, the debate initiated by Father Jenkins exposed a great deal of hostility among faculty members toward traditional Catholic teachings as well as a confusion about the nature of Catholic higher education itself.

The Rev. Bill Miscamble, a distinguished historian and former rector of the campus seminary, expressed the disappointment that many of us feel at Father Jenkins's decision. He suggested that it had "brought most joy to those who care least about Notre Dame's Catholic mission." He criticized Father Jenkins in an open letter to him: "You were called to be courageous and you settled for being popular."

Such commotion comes 15 years after the promulgation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, Pope John Paul II's encyclical aimed at ensuring the orthodoxy of Catholic theology departments. It is not evident that the encyclical has been properly followed. Very few administrators at Catholic colleges and universities are willing publicly to discuss their conformity with its requirements.

Father Jenkins's retreat on "The Vagina Monologues" and the Queer Film Festival raises questions about whether Notre Dame has the will to retain its Catholic distinctiveness in the face of a hostile culture and whether it can do so with a faculty that seems largely out of sympathy with Catholic tradition. It is a good time to contemplate such questions, the holiest week of the calendar, when Christians celebrate ultimate victory emerging from apparent defeat.

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(See related letter: "Letters to the Editor: Notre Dame's Surrender to a Hostile Culture" – WSJ May 5, 2006)
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