

# The Irish Rover

## Did Jenkins Cave in To Faculty Pressure?

Tommy Forr, Editor-in-Chief (04-20-06)

In the wake of Father Jenkins' closing statement on academic freedom and the *Vagina Monologues*, a flurry of speculation has begun to permeate all levels of the Notre Dame community.

Some professors have suggested that Father Jenkins simply caved in to faculty pressure; others say that he truly had a change of heart. Some alumni are calling this decision the last step on Notre Dame's long trek toward secularization; others, including Father Jenkins, claim that this decision will elevate Catholicism at this university.

### *Capitulation or Conversion?*

Father Bill Miscamble, professor of history and former rector of Moreau Seminary, criticized Father Jenkins for caving in to pressure from the faculty. "You were called to be courageous and you settled for being popular," Miscamble wrote in an April 11th letter to the *Observer*. "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."

Dean of the College of Arts and Letters Mark Roche told The Rover that members of the faculty were, indeed, very concerned with how this decision would play out - to the point that some may have seriously considered leaving the university. "[...] I am aware of some faculty members, both Catholic and non-Catholic, as well as at least one prospective faculty member, a Catholic, who expressed sufficient unease about the issue that, pending a final decision, I would have been concerned about retention or recruitment," Roche said.

"If Notre Dame pursued a path that these faculty members were to interpret as a path that was something less than the path of a great university, then they would, in fact, over time look for other options," said Roche. "That's not an irrational perspective."

Roche said that he was not aware of any department chairpersons who had threatened to leave the University if Father Jenkins had placed restrictions on the *Monologues*. However, he noted that at least one chairperson "was genuinely concerned about his or her capacity to represent the University appropriately if he or she disagreed with the President on such a fundamental issue..."

Professor Daniel Myers, chair of Sociology, said that he had not heard of any chairpersons who had seriously considered resigning over the *Monologues*. Professor Keith Bradley, chair of Classics, declined to comment. And when The Rover asked Peter Holland, chair of Film, Television, and Theater, whether he knew of any prominent chairs that had considered leaving Notre Dame pending Jenkins' decision, he said, "I know that various people were considering various things." He declined further comment.

According to Roche, Father Jenkins was aware of these major concerns that some faculty members had. But Roche maintained that Jenkins did not 'cave in'. "The idea that he backed down for political reasons strikes me as less cogent than the idea that he saw that the events were not harmful to our collective identity," Roche said. "He's taking some PR hits, but he'd take them either way."

### *More Positive than Meets the Eye*

Professor Walter Nicgorski, Program of Liberal Studies, thinks that from a Catholic perspective, there is more positive to Jenkins' statement than meets the eye. "I sense a shifting in the ground," Nicgorski said. "Catholic character is now an issue."

"Now, I think, as a result of this debate, Father Jenkins really has all people on all sides recognizing that the

Catholic character of this University is important,” Nicgorski said. “Department chairs and committee members, in all that they do, now must recognize that they’re going to have to speak to this.”

“It’s engaging in the culture,” said Nicgorski. “It’s an opportunity to reach out to students who are alienated, who go to programs that are not particularly Catholic. If the Catholic presence can be articulated, well, that’s a good thing.”

Dean Roche echoed Nicgorski’s remarks. “In a way, it’s positive for the soul of our students that these events happen and have some kind of orchestration [...] If the *Vagina Monologues* did not have the academic fora or academic opportunities in class...if we didn’t have that, you might be a little concerned about the souls of our students.”

Philosophy Professor Alfred Freddoso, conceded that perhaps the changes in the way departments handle sponsorship “may lead to improvements in the future.” However, he disagreed about the efficacy of having a faculty panel after the *Monologues*. “The VM are simply not appropriate for framing a ‘dialogue’ about sexuality that is supposed to include the presentation of Catholic views,” Freddoso wrote in a thread on Amy Wellborn’s blog, *Open Book* – the most widely read Catholic blog in the United States. “The VM are the equivalent of spitting in the face of faithful Catholics, and it’s not usually a good idea to spit in the face of someone you ‘sincerely’ want to ‘dialogue’ with.”

Professor Nicgorski also recognized that there are potential problems with this approach “Indeed, one major problem to highlight is that you can’t expect Catholic faculty to go to these events – and that’s a problem to be reckoned with.”

#### *Catholic Faculty: Essential to any Solution*

Dean Roche and Professors Nicgorski and Freddoso all agreed, however, that Catholic faculty are essential for the University.

“The real problem is that the hiring policies of the last thirty years have given us a faculty, especially in the humanities and sciences, that is more and more devoid of Catholic sensibilities,” Freddoso said. “Fr. Jenkins sincerely wants to do something about it. The question is whether he will be able to. There is no group of people harder to deal with than entrenched university faculty.”

Roche echoed these sentiments, calling the *Monologues* “the 10th or 11th most important Catholic issue on campus.” In addition to the importance of faculty hiring, Roche mentioned several other ways Notre Dame can maintain and enhance its Catholic identity. Students can take interdisciplinary minors that help bring together disparate strands of the Catholic tradition or take a third philosophy or theology class to some of the more important Catholic issues. Roche also suggested that existing faculty could be given opportunities to learn more about Catholic issues through workshops and discussion groups.

“It now becomes even more critical that there be a critical mass of faculty informed and steeped in the Catholic tradition,” said Nicgorski. “It ups the ante of maintaining Catholic faculty.”

Contact Tommy at [tforr@nd.edu](mailto:tforr@nd.edu)