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The decision to allow performances of 'The Vagina Monologues' at the University of Notre Dame

March 2008

Reverend John Jenkins, CSC, and I have been in communication about his decision to allow performances of "The Vagina Monologues" at Notre Dame. I am grateful to Father Jenkins for the extensive time he has put into our conversation and correspondence on these matters over the last two months, and I have taken care in this statement to present his position accurately in order to make a fair response. Father Jenkins has informed me that, while he thinks that this play is a bad play, he believes that permitting its performance under certain conditions, namely, in an academic building without fundraising and with a panel discussion afterwards in which the Catholic perspective is represented, is consistent with the identity of a Catholic university. In particular, Father Jenkins believes that reading the works of authors such as Nietzsche, Gibbon, Luther and Joyce, who in various ways espouse ideas that are contrary to Catholic teaching, in classes at Notre Dame, is comparable to permitting performances of "The Vagina Monologues" under the conditions specified.

As bishop of this historic diocese, entrusted with the spiritual welfare of all those who live within its borders, including the students at our beloved Notre Dame, I believe that, once again, I must publicly and respectfully disagree with Father Jenkins' decision. I am convinced that permitting performances of "The Vagina Monologues" is not consistent with the identity of a Catholic university and not comparable to the long accepted academic tradition through which a wide variety of authors are read and discussed in classes at Notre Dame and in all institutions of higher learning.

In the first place, the difference between the works of authors such as Nietzsche, Gibbon, Luther and Joyce, and "The Vagina Monologues" is a difference, not of degree, but of kind. The former have written serious philosophical, theological and literary works, which have influenced Western thought. As such, their work has academic merit and is worthy of serious discussion and critique in a classroom setting. Father Jenkins believes that Eve Ensler's play was written to shock and offend. How can one put such a play, which many consider pornographic, on the level of serious works such as the writings of Gibbon and Luther?

Even if one could make a case that this play has academic merit, it could be read in class. When a book or play is read in class, the student expects it to be discussed and critiqued; indeed, this is an essential part of the classroom experience. This is not so when one attends the performance of a play. One generally goes to a play and leaves; staying afterwards to listen to a panel discussion about the play is not inherent in the activity of attending a play. No one who comes to the play is required to stay for the panel discussion, and Father Jenkins' attempt to give the performances of this play an academic quality seems deficient.

In addition, unlike reading the play as a classroom assignment, the performances are themselves an endorsement of the international V-Day campaign, even if this is done without fundraising. Is this not the motivation of the departments that have asked to sponsor the play and the young women who will be acting in it? Did they not propose to have multiple performances of the play again this year because they believe it conveys an important message, and they want as many people to see it as possible? In short, people push to have this play performed year after year because they endorse the message it conveys, and they want to be part of the international campaign to promote this message. In allowing performances of the play on campus again this year, whether or not they are officially considered part of the V-Day campaign, Notre Dame continues to cooperate in advancing the campaign's agenda, an agenda which, as I have

repeatedly reflected in my several statements over the years, is directly opposed to the dignity of the human person and is antithetical to Catholic teaching.

According to their Web site, the international V-Day campaign has extended the time when this play can be performed to March 30. But if this play is performed on the dates scheduled, it will be held during Easter week, the holiest time of the church year. Notre Dame has a long and blessed tradition of liturgical excellence, a tradition both theoretical and practical and eminently pastoral and prayerful. Easter week is liturgically considered as Easter Day. Surely Notre Dame will not prefer or even seem to prefer the requirements of the V-Day campaign to the proper observance of Easter.

Perhaps an analogy might illustrate how critical the context is when making decisions about what is appropriate to allow. Suppose that Notre Dame was a Catholic University in Nazi Germany in 1938, and a portion of the faculty and student body were Nazi sympathizers. Suppose further that there was a national movement to show a prominent Nazi propaganda film on college campuses. Would not the showing of such a film at Notre Dame involve the university in providing a platform for Nazi propaganda and entail some level of cooperation with the evil of Nazism? Would providing a panel in which the Catholic attitude towards Nazism was included as one among several viewpoints, in any way mitigate the evil involved in showing such a film? Would not the university bear moral responsibility for the fact that some students who viewed the film on campus might be persuaded by the propaganda and become Nazi supporters?

I chose this analogy because Father Jenkins, in our correspondence, made mention of a series of documentary films shown recently on campus concerning the early days of Nazism, which he believes would also have to be banned if "The Vagina Monologues" were banned. But there is an enormous difference between showing a Nazi propaganda film in 2008 and showing it in 1938. One is a matter of historic and scholarly interest in a long-past event, and the other constitutes active cooperation in promoting a current and threatening evil ideology.

I am convinced that, in the current cultural context, allowing performances of "The Vagina Monologues" at Notre Dame is analogous to the situation described above. The play is little more than a propaganda piece for the sexual revolution and secular feminism. While claiming to deplore violence against women, the play at the same time violates the standards of decency and morality that safeguard a woman's dignity and protect her, body and soul, from sexual

predators. The human community has generally refrained from exposing and discussing the hidden parts of a woman's body, preferring to consider them private and even sacred. Most importantly, the sexual sin, which the play depicts in several scenes, desecrates women just as much as, if not more deeply than, sexual violence does. The play depicts, exalts, and endorses female masturbation, which is a sin. It depicts, exalts, and endorses a sexual relationship between an adult woman and a child, a minor, which is a sin and also a crime. It depicts and exalts the most base form of sexual relationship between a man and a woman. These illicit sexual actions are portrayed as paths to healing, and the implication is that the historic, positive understanding of heterosexual marriage as the norm is what we must recover from.

Father Jenkins has informed me that after each evening performance there will be a panel discussion, which will include someone who will give an informed and sympathetic presentation of Catholic teaching. In so doing, he notes that Notre Dame "has taken stronger steps than many other Catholic institutions to put limits on the performance of this play." While this may well be true, there are a growing number of Catholic institutions of higher learning that have permanently banned the play.

The overriding issue here is moral. The play is an affront to human dignity, as Catholic teaching understands it. If it is performed, it should be denounced. Otherwise, the university appears to endorse it as in some way good and the impression is given that Catholic teaching is one option competing among many. This method places faith in a defensive position and on the margin and is unacceptable at a Catholic university.

"A faith that places itself on the margin of what is human, of what is therefore culture, would be a faith unfaithful to the fullness of what the Word of God manifests and reveals, a decapitated faith, worse still, a faith in the process of self-annihilation." — John Paul II, Address to Intellectuals, to Students and to University Personnel at Medellín, Columbia, 5 July, 1986. Cited in "Ex Corde Ecclesiae" 44.

Some claim that a performance of the play followed by a panel will "engage the culture" and that out of such a discussion the "truth will emerge." Sadly, "Ex Corde Ecclesiae" is even cited in defense of this position. But what makes a Catholic university distinctive is the conviction that in the search for truth, we do not start from scratch; we start from the truth that has been revealed to us in the Word of God, the person of Jesus Christ, and the teaching of his church. The notion

that truth will emerge from a discussion in which many points of view are represented both disrespects revealed truth and separates the search for truth from the certainty of faith; instead, as Pope John Paul II stated in "Ex Corde Ecclesiae": "A Catholic university's privileged task is 'to unite existentially by intellectual effort two orders of reality that too frequently tend to be placed in opposition as though they were antithetical: the search for truth, and the certainty of already knowing the fount of truth.'" — John Paul II, Discourse to the Institut Catholique de Paris, June, 1, 1980, cited in "Ex Corde Ecclesiae," 1.

For these reasons, I believe that the performing of this play, even with one or more persons willing to present Catholic teaching, is in direct opposition to both the spirit and letter of "Ex Corde Ecclesiae." Also, because it depicts and endorses sinful sexual acts in direct opposition to church teaching, I believe its performance to be pornographic and spiritually harmful. This judgment is made after prayer, reflection and dialogue and after preparing several statements over many years.

Because of this pastoral finding, of which I am convinced, and keeping in mind primarily the spiritual welfare of our young students, the good name of Notre Dame and her well-earned position of academic and Catholic leadership, and the blessed Easter week — I remain hopeful that Father Jenkins will reconsider his decision for this year and future years. A decision not to sponsor the play is not only consistent with academic freedom but is a right use of such freedom for it shows respect for the truth, for the common good and the rights of others. (ef. "Ex Corde Ecclesiae," 12)

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