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## Concerning a current presentation at Notre Dame

By Bishop John M. D'Arcy

It has been customary at this time of the year for many institutions of higher learning, including, regrettably, Catholic institutions, to present something called "The Vagina Monologues." Alas, even our beloved University of Notre Dame is presenting it again, as it has for the past several years, under the official sponsorship of three departments.

The bishop is the teacher within his diocese, bearing special responsibility before God to shed light on moral issues, especially when the souls of young people are involved; not his own light, but the light that comes from the Gospel, from the teachings of Christ and the church. To be sure that I have understood what is at stake here, and conscious of the importance of proper research at all times, but especially when dealing with an institution of higher learning, I have read and studied the text in question.

"The Vagina Monologues" is offensive to women; it is antithetical to Catholic teaching on the beautiful gift of human sexuality and also to the teachings of the church on the human body relative to its purpose and to its status as a temple of the Holy Spirit. The human body and the human person, in the tradition of the church, must never be seen as an object; but that is the way they are presented in this text.

**The dignity of women**

All of us are called to communion with one another. This is when both man and woman are at their best. Sin separates us and urges one to seek domination over the other. This text separates the beautiful gift of sexuality from its purpose, which includes the expression of a gift of oneself to another in a permanent union of life and love. Indeed, the play also separates the gift of human sexuality from the woman herself, from her body and her spirit and from the bearing of children.

Everyone should be treated with dignity. This is part of our following of the Gospel.

*“A woman’s dignity is closely connected with the love which she receives by the very reason of her femininity; it is likewise connected with the love which she gives in return.”*  
*“On the Dignity of Women,” Pope John Paul II*

Indeed, it can truly be said that woman, like man, can only find herself by giving herself to others. This has always been a welcome theme at Notre Dame. The theme, however, finds no place in the text in question. In that text, the physical is separated from the spiritual. The body is separated from love. The woman is separated from the man, and is even placed in opposition to him. There is nothing of beauty here, nothing of love. There is much here which Notre Dame has stood against and has opposed in recent times, both in administrative decisions and in pastoral work. It is especially painful that this play is being performed at Notre Dame, “the School of Our Lady,” as many of her graduates call her. She, who is both virgin and mother, has always drawn people in this place to the highest ideals in their respect for one another and for women. Her watchful presence over the campus and her prayerful intercession for Notre Dame over the years cannot be tarnished; but her presence, so often invoked in this place, gives special responsibilities to the rest of us who love her and who love her university.

### **The present time**

The Catholic Church in this country has passed through and, in a sense, is still passing through a grave crisis. Some of those called to the most noble of vocations, and vowed to make present Christ, the Good Shepherd, have failed in their promises, and young people, our most precious of gifts, have been wounded in body and soul. Notre Dame, faithful to its tradition and its responsibilities as a great Catholic university, stepped forward and took a positive and helpful stand in the midst of this crisis through convocations for bishops, priests, historians, lawyers and seminary faculties, as well as in internal seminars within the university. Yet, this text carries within it and honors a sexual relationship between an adult woman and a very young girl — the very thing which Notre Dame has opposed in these seminars, and which, in fact, is a crime in both civil and church law.

I urge Notre Dame to look at the contradiction here, especially in light of its long service to the human person. The consistency that one looks for, and so often finds at Notre Dame, is sorely missing in the decision to present a play which exalts such a relationship.

**The question of freedom**

Freedom in the Catholic tradition, and even in the American political tradition, is not the right to do anything. Freedom in the Catholic tradition is not the right to do this rather than that. That would be an entirely superficial idea of freedom. Freedom in the academy is always subject to a particular discipline. It is never an absolute. The parameters of the particular discipline guide research.

Freedom is the capacity to choose the good. In "Ex Corde Ecclesiae," John Paul II makes it clear that a Catholic university "guarantee its members academic freedom, so long as the rights of the individual person and of the community are preserved within the confines of the truth and the common good."

Here, the Holy Father, a long-time professor in a Catholic university, indicates certain parameters relative to freedom, namely, truth and the common good.

This play violates the truth about women, the truth about sexuality, the truth about male and female and the truth about the human body.

It is in opposition to the highest understanding of academic freedom. For freedom which is not linked to truth is soon extinguished. A Catholic university seeks truth. It is never afraid of truth, but seeks it with respect for both reason and faith. Each gives light and guidance to the other. How has the light coming from faith, or indeed from right reason, been brought to bear on the decision to present this play?

Also, what possible advantage can this text have to the common good of society or of the church? I have dialogued on this matter with my good friend, Father Edward Malloy, CSC, in two exchanges of letters in which I shared with him my pastoral concern. Such quiet dialogues on difficult matters have always been my *modus operandi* with Notre Dame and the other Catholic institutions of higher learning in our diocese, especially on difficult issues. This is in the spirit of "Ex Corde Ecclesiae" that calls for a spirit of friendship between bishops and university leadership through "close personal and pastoral relationships characterized by mutual trust, close and constant cooperation and continuing dialogues."

But a bishop has an obligation to teach, and there comes a time when the young people at Notre Dame have a right to know the judgment of the bishop on a moral question, a time when clarity about the teaching of the church is required. A bishop can never refuse to exercise this responsibility so central to his vocation. If a teacher has academic freedom, is a bishop to be denied pastoral freedom?

I wish to repeat that Notre Dame on a number of issues, several of them related to Catholic teaching on sexuality, has taken positions that have often gone against the dominant university culture, and that have not always been emulated by other major Catholic universities. I wish to honor those earlier decisions and to entreat Notre Dame to bring the same convictions of courage, truth and consistency to this matter.

The words of Pope John Paul II seem to me to be of special relevance here:

*“It is essential that we be convinced of the priority of the ethical over the technical, of the primacy of the person over things, of the superiority of the spirit over matter. The cause of the human person will only be served if knowledge is joined to conscience. Men and women of science will truly serve humanity only if they preserve the sense of the transcendence of the human person over the world and of God over the human person.”*  
*“ Ex Corde Ecclesiae ”*

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