

# Closing Statement on Academic Freedom and Catholic Character

Rev. John I. Jenkins, C.S.C.  
April 5, 2006

Last January, I raised a challenge for Notre Dame: to consider how we can affirm the highest principles and practices of a university—ensuring the academic freedom to explore the full range of ideas and expressions produced by human thought and creativity—and, at the same time, to affirm our Catholic character and engage the Catholic intellectual tradition in a way that shapes and enriches the educational experience of our students.

The challenge is not to do just one of these—or even to do both of them in parallel—but to promote academic freedom and affirm our Catholic character in a way that integrates the two and elevates both. This University was founded on the conviction that these goals are not just compatible, but essential, beneficial, and mutually reinforcing.

We have had this discussion of lofty ideals largely in the context of a single play. But we have to make sure that this event, or any single event, does not take on any undue stature. It is not more important than the principles we are discussing; it is a test of how we apply them.

Over the past ten weeks, I have met, talked to, and heard from hundreds of men and women—faculty, students, and administrators; alumni and friends. I have met individually with department chairs and faculty; attended a forum put on by the College of Arts and Letters; and participated in meetings of the Faculty Senate, the Student Senate, and the Graduate Student Council. I have read the e-mails sent to me, and I have carefully and faithfully read the news coverage and opinions in *The Observer*. I thank everyone who took the time to share their thoughts; I have been impressed by the passion, intelligence, and civility of this debate.

Some of the individuals I've talked with are adamantly opposed to the performance or expression on campus of a work, play, book, or speech that contradicts Catholic teaching. To them, we must say, with all respect: "This is a Catholic *university*." We are committed to a wide-open, unconstrained search for truth, and we are convinced that Catholic teaching has nothing to fear from engaging the wider culture.

Others I talked to were appalled that we would raise any question about the content, message, or implications of a work of art, drama, or literature here on campus. To them, we have to say, with the same respect: "This is a *Catholic* university." It is founded upon our belief that

love of God and neighbor are eternal teachings that give context and meaning to our search for truth. As I said, Catholic teaching has nothing to fear from engaging the wider culture, but we all have something to fear if the wider culture never engages Catholic teaching. That is why the Catholic tradition must not only inspire our worship and our service on campus; it should help shape the intellectual life of the university. Our goal is not to limit discussion or inquiry, but to enrich it; it is not to insulate that faith tradition from criticism, but to foster constructive engagement with critics.

Like any university, we have a responsibility to foster intellectual engagement with various perspectives and forms of knowledge, but as a Catholic university, we have the added responsibility of fostering engagement among these perspectives and forms of knowledge with the Catholic intellectual tradition. As Pope John Paul II wrote, the Catholic university is "a primary and privileged place for a fruitful dialogue between the Gospel and culture" [*Ex corde ecclesiae*, 3.34].

Grounded in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Catholic intellectual tradition develops through this dialogue with culture, as it encounters new questions and discoveries; as it speaks on emerging social questions; as it applies the truths of the Gospel to complex situations wrought by advances in science. How our ancient but evolving Catholic tradition expresses itself in the future depends to a large extent on the work of this and other Catholic universities. After all, a Catholic university is where the Church does its thinking, and that thinking, to be beneficial, must come from an intellectually rigorous engagement with the world.

For these reasons, I am very determined that we not suppress speech on this campus. I am also determined that we never suppress or neglect the Gospel that inspired this University. As long as the Gospel message and the Catholic intellectual tradition are appropriately represented, we can welcome any serious debate on any thoughtful position here at Notre Dame.

The only exception I can imagine would come in the case of expression that is overt and insistent in its contempt for the values and sensibilities of this University, or of any of the diverse groups that form part of our community. This sort of expression is not at issue in the current debate, nor do I expect it to be an issue in the future.

These are the general principles that have emerged from the many discussions I have had with members of the Notre Dame family. I believe they are principles that a large majority of this community can embrace. It is now time to apply these principles to the matter at hand, and to make decisions regarding the performance of *The Vagina Monologues* on campus and other matters related to academic freedom and our Catholic character.

In the ten weeks since my faculty address, I have seen *The Vagina Monologues* performed by our students, and I have discussed the play with its performers and supporters. I still believe—as I said in my address to the faculty—that its portrayals of sexuality stand apart from, and indeed in opposition to, Catholic teaching on human sexuality. Of course, as I have described, there must be room in a university for expressions that do not accord with Catholic teaching, and that is true in the case of this play.

My concern with *The Vagina Monologues* was not simply with some of its content, but with the prominence given to it by annual performances over five years, accompanied by publicity and fundraising activities. It is essential that we hear a full range of views on campus,

including views contrary to Catholic teaching. But because we are a Catholic university, we must strive to bring these various views into dialogue with the Catholic intellectual tradition. This demands balance among diverse views and the inclusion of the Catholic perspective. There are no sharp, easily drawn lines here, and achieving this balance requires discretion and judgment.

Thanks to the efforts of some faculty members, this year's performance of *The Vagina Monologues* was brought into dialogue with Catholic tradition through panels that followed each performance. Panelists presented the Catholic teaching on human sexuality, and students and faculty engaged one another and these issues in serious and informed discussion. These panels taught me and perhaps taught others that the creative contextualization of a play like *The Vagina Monologues* can bring certain perspectives on important issues into a constructive and fruitful dialogue with the Catholic tradition. This is a good model for the future. Accordingly, I see no reason to prohibit performances of *The Vagina Monologues* on campus, and do not intend to do so.

Now, let me address the important issues and causes that animated the performers. In my faculty address, I made it clear that I saw many laudable goals in the play: to help women develop a positive, accepting attitude toward their own bodies; to encourage them to see their sexuality as a gift to be cherished; to urge them to take pride in their identity as women; and—the most urgent goal—to inspire us to work with greater determination to eliminate violence against women.

Notre Dame must do more to advance these goals. The student leaders of *The Vagina Monologues* have proposed producing a play written in their own voices and describing their own experiences, entitled *Loyal Daughters*. This production will be put on entirely by Notre Dame students in consultation with the faculty advisors they have chosen. I will do all I can to support this effort.

In addition, I have formed an ad hoc committee composed of faculty, administrators, and students, charged with fostering a wide-ranging discussion of gender relations, roles, and ways to prevent violence against women. This committee, which I will chair, will help enrich our discussion of issues critical to the lives of women here at Notre Dame and beyond.

I am grateful to the following people who have agreed to serve on the committee:

- Gail Bederman, Associate Professor, History
- John Cavadini, Department Chair and Associate Professor, Theology
- Ann Firth, Associate Vice President, Student Affairs
- M. Cathleen Kaveny, John P. Murphy Foundation Professor, Law School; Professor, Theology
- Jean Ann Linney, Vice President and Associate Provost; Professor, Psychology
- Carolyn Nordstrom, Professor, Anthropology
- Margot O'Brien, Associate Professional Specialist, Accountancy
- Ava Preacher, Assistant Dean, College of Arts and Letters
- Kathleen Pyne, Professor, Art
- Heather Rakoczy, Director of Gender Relations Center, Student Affairs
- Dayle Seidenspinner-Núñez, Associate Dean, College of Arts and Letters; Professor, Romance Languages and Literatures

- Frances L. Shavers, Executive Assistant to the President
- Alexandre Chapeaux, Student
- Gregory Floyd, Student
- Madison Liddy, Student
- Madeleine Ryland, Student
- Danielle Thomson, Student
- Emily Weisbecker, Student

Finally, in my earlier address I raised general questions about decisions to sponsor events on controversial subjects, particularly events that may promote opinions that the University plainly does not endorse. I have been having extensive discussions with departmental chairs about this issue.

We have reached a written understanding, which is available online at <http://president.nd.edu/closingstatement/commonproposal/>.

The key points of our agreement are these: Sponsoring speakers and events is an indispensable means for promoting debate on controversial subjects—an important mission of any university. Academic departments are best situated to decide what events should or should not be sponsored. Sponsors have a role in communicating the academic rationale for controversial events. They also have a responsibility to make clear—on campus and off—that sponsorship does not imply endorsement of the views expressed by a speaker or of an event as a whole. Finally, we agreed to work together to promote a vibrant intellectual environment in which multiple viewpoints and voices on controversial topics are heard; an appropriate balance among viewpoints is maintained; and, when a significant issue in Catholic teaching is touched upon, the Catholic tradition is presented.

This agreement will be presented to the Academic Council for consideration. If accepted, it will provide guidelines for sponsoring academic events at Notre Dame.

These three initiatives—the conception and performance of *Loyal Daughters*, the formation of the ad hoc committee, and the guidelines for sponsoring academic events—form the substantive results of our two-month discussion.

In addition, and just as important, we can say that here at Notre Dame, over the past ten weeks, strong differences in opinion were revealed, and views which were passionately held were passionately expressed. Yet whatever the differences, members of this community conducted a serious, thoughtful, reasoned exchange about matters that affect our future. The role of a university is to conduct such vigorous exchanges about the values and principles of the wider society. It can be far more difficult and contentious to engage in *self*-reflection, and to debate the values and principles that will shape our own smaller society here at the University. We had that debate, and together, we held it to a very high standard.

The deep reflection on our ideals and actions inspired by this discussion should not end here. We must channel the energy awakened by this debate to serve the causes that animate the debate—the need for open, unrestricted academic inquiry; the need to foster a constructive

engagement with the Catholic intellectual tradition; and the pressing need for The University of Our Lady to be a rising force for defending and advancing the rights and dignity of all women, everywhere. May God bless our efforts.

 John Jenkins

**Rev. John I. Jenkins, C.S.C.**

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