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Backing Down At Notre Dame

By JAMES K. FITZPATRICK

Many Catholics were heartened by news reports that the new president of Notre Dame, Fr. John Jenkins, was going to prohibit performances of *The Vagina Monologues* at the university. I was on board, devoting a column a few weeks ago to a *New York Times* story in mid-March about Jenkins' willingness to take on the trendy secular leftists in regard to this play. Jenkins would not have had to mount the barricades alone. Providence College and the Catholic University of America banned the play earlier this year, as has Fr. Jenkins' superior in the Holy Cross religious order at the University of Portland.

The *Times* quoted from a speech given by Jenkins to faculty members and students at the university in which he maintained that permitting productions like *The Vagina Monologues* implied an "endorsement of values in conflict with Roman Catholicism." Jenkins elaborated: "Precisely because academic freedom is such a sacred value, we must be clear about its appropriate limits. I do not believe that freedom of expression has absolute priority in every circumstance."

He took the position that *The Vagina Monologues* should be commended for trying to reduce violence against women, but that its "graphic descriptions" of various sexual experiences "stand apart from, and indeed in opposition to" the Church's teaching "that human sexuality finds its proper expression in the committed relationship of marriage between a man and a woman that is open to the gift of procreation." You can see why many Catholics were hopeful.

Those who were hopeful were premature. Jenkins backed down. David Solomon, the director of Notre Dame's Center for Ethics and Culture and a member of the university's department of philosophy, called it a "retreat" in an op-ed column in April 14 issue of *The Wall Street Journal*. Solomon attributes the retreat to pressure mounted on Jenkins during "campus-wide meetings" he convened to discuss what to do about the play. Jenkins faced faculty members who, says Solomon, were "plotting" his "removal from office for even discussing possible restrictions."

So Jenkins caved; just days before Holy Week, he announced, "I see no reason to prohibit performances of *The Vagina Monologues* on campus, and do not intend to do so." The plotting professors, writes Solomon, "now congratulated him, and his former student critics praised him as a champion of personal freedom."

Why didn't Catholic professors loyal to the Magisterium rally to Jenkins' side in the face of this pressure? It turns out there aren't many of them at Notre Dame these days. Dr. Solomon: "To some of us — and I speak as a Notre Dame professor — Fr. Jenkins' 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 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 Fr. Jenkins exposed a great hostility among faculty members toward traditional Catholic teachings as well as a confusion about the nature of Catholic higher education itself."

What about *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, Pope John Paul II's 1990 apostolic constitution aimed at ensuring the orthodoxy of Catholic theology departments? Writes Solomon: "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."

Solomon is not the only one disappointed. Fr. Bill Miscamble, a historian and former rector of Notre Dame's campus seminary, was quoted in Solomon's column. In an open letter to Fr. Jenkins, he wrote that Jenkins' decision "brought joy to those who care least about Notre Dame's Catholic mission. You were called to be courageous and you settled for being popular." Pow!

This brings up an old — but still relevant — debate: the question of how wise it was for Catholic colleges to water down their religious identities in order to qualify for federal funding back in the late 1960s. When that decision was made, we were assured that it would be largely a pro for-

ma change; that, since the faculties and student bodies at these schools would remain Catholic, the schools would retain their Catholic character; that Georgetown would always be Georgetown and Notre Dame always Notre Dame.

Not so. It is clear that there were those who wanted our Catholic universities to become as divorced from their religious roots as the Ivy League universities are from theirs, who pushed for full secularization as a sign of intellectual maturity. They got their way.

Is my point that Catholic universities should go out of their way to hire Catholic professors? Well, yes. Not in every department, of course. I had Jewish professors at Fordham and St. John's back in the 1960s, others whom I suspected were agnostic, even atheists. It did not matter. Some of them were very good. They taught courses in mathematics and science, or if they taught economics and political science, they were more than balanced by the Jesuits and Vincentians of old and Catholic laymen clearly loyal to the Church.

But it is both wise and appropriate for there to be a heavy concentration of Catholic professors loyal to the Magisterium in the departments of theology, philosophy, literature, and history, as well as in the social sciences. A Catholic university should introduce its students to their Catholic heritage. They should experience something different academically from what they would experience if they were attending Ohio State or Stanford. Why else attend a Catholic university?

Graduates of a Catholic university should be introduced to the work of St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and Cardinal Newman; they should be aware of what it is about key elements in the work of Freud and Nietzsche that is unacceptable for a Catholic; know why the social encyclicals oppose both economic individualism and Marxian socialism. Academic excellence is not enough. A Catholic university should be Catholic. That Catholic identity cannot exist without a largely Catholic faculty.

Say what? There aren't enough accomplished Catholic scholars to fill the positions? If so, that doesn't say much for the people who have been running our Catholic universities since the 1970s. But let's not go down that path. The secularizers don't mean that there aren't enough accomplished Catholic teachers to choose from when they are hiring. I repeat: They don't want the faculties at their schools to be markedly Catholic. They take pride in the secularization that has taken place. The fact that Notre Dame takes the same position on *The vagina Monologues* as Cal-Berkeley or Brown shows they have done their job.