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FEB 7, 2003

THE CATHOLIC FREE PRESS

'Monologues' encore sparks Web dialogue

Pornography or empowerment of women?

By William T. Clew

"The Vagina Monologues," a presentation which some critics say is pornographic, will be presented Feb. 11 and 12 at the College of the Holy Cross.

When the play was presented at the college last year some alumni criticized the college leadership for allowing the play to be presented on campus, especially because it was presented on Ash Wednesday.

Kathy McNamara, director of public relations at Holy Cross, said the Women's Forum, a recognized student organization at the college, will give a series of readings which make up the Monologues.

She said the group sought permission to give the presentation last year. After a dialogue with the administration, the group was given permission. Ms. McNamara said the presentation was done to raise consciousness about violence against women. She said Jesuit Father Michael C. McFarland, president of Holy Cross, said the reason for the presentation was legitimate, though he did not agree with some of the content of the presentation. The reason for the presentation still is legitimate this year, she said.

In an article about the play in last spring's Holy Cross Magazine, Father McFarland was quoted as saying: "I can understand people objecting to 'The

Vagina Monologues.' We considered very carefully the decision to stage the readings here. One of our student groups, the Women's Forum, wanted to put it on as part of a national effort to raise consciousness against women. Their concerns deserve our attention. The play isn't the vehicle I would have chosen, but it is a legitimate piece."

Proceeds from the production will go to the Rape Crisis Center this year, she said. Last year proceeds went to Abby's House.

Vic Melfa, Holy Cross graduate in 1957 and founder and president of the Holy Cross Cardinal Newman Society, posted information about the upcoming performance on the Newman Society Web site, www.HCCNS.org.

He said he did so to let people know it was happening and let them know why such a production doesn't belong at a Catholic college. He calls the play a "pornographic production." He said making people aware of abuse against women is important, but this production is the wrong way to do it.

He and others have questioned the Catholic identity of Holy Cross. When the HCCNS was formed by Mr. Melfa on May 14, 2002, the first notice was aimed principally at alumni who graduated before 1972. Since then it has expanded to include those who graduated more recently, he said. He said the group has received responses

from "thousands of alumni (who) sent financial contributions and letters stating that they were 'deeply' concerned about the extent of Holy Cross' secularization' and 'support appropriate measures to correct that condition and preserve Holy Cross' Catholic character.'"

Several letters on the HCCNS Web site addressed the production of the play at Holy Cross. One, from a woman identified as Kristen Paquette, Class of 2003, describes herself as an executive board member of the Women's Forum and a member of the production committee for the presentation.

"Anyone who is so opposed and willing to deem pornographic a production that furthers the success of a movement that is opposed to violence against women has missed a crucial part in his or her education at Holy Cross," she wrote.

She wrote that a main goal of the production is to raise money for organizations that cater to the needs of women. Last year, she said, the Women's Forum donated \$5,400 to Abby's House, and this year the proceeds will go to the Rape Crisis Center.

Mr. Melfa, in a letter on the Web site, wrote that "though we believe it is very, very important to make more people aware of the abuse of women, we believe there are many other ways to do so, and that the 'end' doesn't justify the 'means.'"

"We don't believe sexual sins (per the Catholic Catechism), like fornication and lesbian molestation of a minor should be graphically described in detail at a Catholic college in a favorable light as liberating or 'salvation.' Rather, they would be condemned."

Other letters on the Web site supported or objected to the production of the play at the college.

A woman identified as Cate Leonard, who wrote that she also is a Women's Forum executive board member and on the play's production team, said that the play would be presented from 7:30 to 11 p.m. Feb. 11 and 12 in the Hogan Ballroom at Holy Cross. She thanked those on the Web site for the "free publicity of our cause that strives to end violence against women.... If you'd like to get off your Biblical soap boxes and see why Jesus would have supported the empowerment of women, we'd love to have you come to our performance."

A man identified as Arthur G. Mattei responded: "Cate, not that Jesus 'would have supported the empowerment of women' but that He did support the empowerment of women in countless ways. I am also quite confident, however, that He would not have supported the Vagina Monologues as a vehicle to help achieve that end, no matter how noble that end might be, as in your case.... Remember, however, the end never justifies the means!"