

WHY WE OBJECT TO “CORPUS CHRISTI”

[The following is a short excerpt of the remarks made by Catholic League director of research Robert P. Lockwood at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne on August 14. His comments were made at an all day forum at the university.]

Terrence McNally's play "Corpus Christi" is masked as some kind of clarion call for toleration. It's not. The play is an attack on Christianity and Christian beliefs. Within the context of university life here at IPFW, the play is meant as an anti-Christian screed, a denial of Christians' right to their own defined beliefs. "Corpus Christi" is intended to offend, not enlighten. As McNally himself explains, "The play is more a religious ritual than a play. A play teaches us a new insight into the human condition. A ritual is an action we perform over and over because we have to." In McNally's own words, the play is offering no new insights, or encouraging careful inquiry. No, it was meant to be an offensive screed and one that will be forced on community members whether they like it or not. And at their expense. Isn't art grand?

Make no mistake – as stated in one of the last lines of the play, it is meant to offend that which so many in our community hold sacred – the Gospel presentation of the Good News of Jesus Christ. McNally's play purposely attacks Catholics and Catholicism specifically and Christianity in general. "Corpus Christi" is mean-spirited, vicious and, to utilize an old word that carried weight in the past, sacrilegious. Its goal is to offend the very core, heartfelt and basic Christian beliefs of many within the community. By depicting Christ and his apostles as sexual gadflies, by portraying priests as "fag haters in priest's robes," by making the Gospel story an ode to sexual hedonism, gay or straight, McNally's intent is simply to intolerantly offend

those who have the temerity in modern times to believe with all their hearts in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I do believe that if a student group wanted to sponsor a public showing of D.W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation" the university would have responded differently. I think the university would have been highly sensitive to the feelings of those who would take umbrage at such a showing and I believe the university would have attempted a mediation at the very beginning that would protect academic freedom and freedom of expression yet, at the same time, have been highly responsive to the depth of hurt such a showing might cause. IPFW would have taken concrete action to respond to that hurt. With "Corpus Christi" the response was nothing. Nothing at all, until window-dressing was deemed necessary in the face of a lawsuit, increased public criticism, and strong questioning from elected officials. Critics were simply dismissed with nothing short of name-calling. The university, the student director, the *Journal Gazette* in particular among media, reacted solely with an attitude of condescension to the critics: superiors lecturing their inferiors. The lesson seemed to be that intolerant speech is fine as long as it is aimed at those who deserve it: believing Christians.

We at the Catholic League did not lend our support to the lawsuit in regard to "Corpus Christi" because we did not accept the premise that there is a right to ban Christian thought and expression from university life. We certainly have every sympathy with those involved with the lawsuit. We understand and share their disgust at the hypocrisy of an educational and legal environment that will ban Christian expression at the drop of a hat, but begs tolerance for every possible anti-Christian expression. But one had to accept the premise that this is in fact correct constitutional interpretation in order to argue for the reverse. You have to accept that Christian views can be banned to argue that there is therefore no right then to present anti-Christian views.

Our purpose is not to reduce the university even more than it has been reduced in recent years to a safe deposit box of murky platitudes. But what we do want is an even playing field. If the university demands "tolerance" and "diversity" then that tolerance should be extended toward Catholic and Christian ideas and viewpoints. If the university demands respect for all, then that respect, courtesy and decency extends to all, including Catholics and Christians. If the university demands freedom of speech, that freedom must extend to Christian and Catholic speech, Christian and Catholic practice and Christian and Catholic belief, as well as any faith-based belief system.