

Critic lauds Cross for refusing to pay feminist speaker

By Emilie Astell
TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

WORCESTER — A Westboro businessman, who earlier criticized the College of the Holy Cross for allowing the production of "The Vagina Monologues" on campus, yesterday praised the school's president for denying payment of a speaker's fee to a feminist on grounds that she would embarrass the campus community.

Victor J. Melfa, a 1957 graduate of Holy Cross and founder and CEO of The Training Associates Corp., said he and other supporters of the drive to bring back Catholicism to the Holy Cross campus are pleased with the Rev. Michael C. McFarland's decision.

The Jesuit president refused to use college funds to pay the \$500 speaking fee of Frances Kissling, president of Catholics for a Free Choice, an abortion rights group. As a result, faculty members on the women's studies committee canceled her Nov. 7 campus appearance. Ms. Kis-

sling was offered an off-campus venue, but she declined to accept.

"We notified our supporters to congratulate him," Mr. Melfa said. "We question why the women's studies department was so bold as to invite her in the first place. Why did they think they could get away with it?"

Mr. Melfa joined protesters on a bitter February day this year outside the college to object to the production of "The Vagina Monologues." While he supports raising awareness of women's rights, he said at the time the play crossed the line of decency.

He speculated that Rev. McFarland may have decided to forbid payment of the speaking fee out of embarrassment over the play.

In a letter to professor Mary Hobgood in the religious studies department, the president said that if Ms. Kissling spoke on campus it would be "an embarrassment to the institution" and "deeply offensive to many people here."

Ms. Kissling said she planned to talk about abuse of power in the Roman Catholic Church through a feminist lens on such topics as the sexual exploitation of Catholic nuns by Catholic priests, the clergy scandal involving sexual abuse of children, denying women the right

to be priests and holding the church accountable in forums such as the United Nations.

"The women's studies group made a mistake in taking it upon themselves to cancel the lecture on campus when the president did not demand this of them," Ms. Kissling said yesterday.

Rev. McFarland characterized Ms. Kissling's criticism of the Catholic Church and its leadership as "strident, personal, manipulative and unfair," according to his letter.

He criticized the women's studies committee for not having better judgment in selection of a speaker, saying that there are many who are advocates of strong feminist positions, including critiques of the Catholic Church and its hierarchy, who would have been acceptable choices.

"Since we do have a policy of allowing virtually anyone who is invited to speak here, you can, if you insist, extend the invitation although I have to tell you I cannot defend the decision and will not attempt to do so," he wrote.

The president was not on campus yesterday and not available for comment.

In a statement he sent by e-mail to a concerned Catholic from Albany, N.Y., who contacted him after his decision was published Friday, Rev.

McFarland said Ms. Kissling's appearance on campus would be "an insult to a large part of our community. From the point of view of someone responsible for the institution and the community it represents, I think these are legitimate concerns and it is proper for me to express them."

Professor Hobgood, director of the women's studies program, said the committee decided to cancel the on-campus speech because women on the faculty felt that this was not the time to bring Ms. Kissling to Holy Cross.

"Feminists on campus find this a difficult time," she said. "My life is difficult enough right now."

She would not be specific as to the reasons for the difficulties, although she said the Catholic Church is not known for its largess toward women.

"Historically, the Catholic Church is a patriarchal institution," she said. "Things get difficult when ideological controversies are confused with personal conflicts. The women's studies committee didn't want to engage in personal conflict. We tried to compromise with regard to the feminist ideology Frances Kissling was going to articulate at Holy Cross."

As for any comparison between the cancellation of Ms. Kissling's speech and "The Vagina Monologues" controversy,

Ms. Hobgood said the two are quite different.

Ms. Kissling, she said, speaks the truth about abuses in the church and social transforma-

tion within the church, two subjects that make people feel much more vulnerable than the play's focus on women's sexuality and sexual abuse.