

A Report on a talk at Saint Mary's University disrupted by protesters

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Jose Ruba, an anti-abortion activist and speaker, came to Saint Mary's last February, at the invitation of a campus group. Protesters shouted him down. Security Chief Bill Promaine asked once, maybe twice, for order, but the protesters paid him no mind, and Mr Promaine didn't press the matter.

A police officer passed by just to check on things, Mr Promaine having notified the police a few hours earlier that a protest of some sort was in the works. The officer took the measure of the crowd and called for assistance. Two other officers arrived and the three instructed those bent on disrupting the event to stop it or face the consequences. The disruptive protesters settled down.

That was about thirty-five or forty minutes after Mr Ruba had begun his presentation.

Despite the fact that Mr Ruba was now free to continue without interruption, Bridget Brownlow, the Conflict Resolution Advisor at Saint Mary's, Mr Promaine, and Dan Kelly, the university's chaplain and one of the organizers of the event, had a brief scrum. Fr Kelly was asked to move the talk off campus. Not wanting to create a fuss, Fr Kelly complied. Mr Ruba and those who wished to hear him left Saint Mary's.

Much of the disruptive protest was caught on video, now posted at <http://www.youtube.com/user/Joerugby07>.

The following Monday (9 February), Saint Mary's University issued a press release (<http://www.smu.ca/newsreleases/2009/02-09-2009.html>). It characterized the disruption as unsuccessful; it gave as grounds for this incredible claim that the presentation continued once relocated. The press release did not condemn the disruption. Moreover, by declaring that Saint Mary's "supports open debate in a forum that does not put ... the rights of our community at risk," it suggested that the protesters had valid grounds to try to end the presentation. In his public statements, the (then) vice-president external of Saint Mary's, Chuck Bridges, implied that Mr Ruba and his sponsors were also at least a little at fault. (I contributed to our campus newspaper two opinion pieces about all this. The first is at <http://smujournal.ca/view.php?aid=39901>. The second is at <http://www.smujournal.ca/view.php?aid=39915>.)

There are three serious questions we at Saint Mary's need to consider, even now that the disruption is half a year behind us.

1) Why didn't Security try to halt the disruption? Mr Promaine thought that because the protesters were threatening neither violence nor vandalism, all was well.

Section 7j of the Student Code of Conduct (*Academic Calendar*, p. 27), though, forbids disruption of university functions. Mr Promaine might have been acting on instructions he received earlier in the day, at a meeting called to discuss what to do in case of a protest.

Mr Promaine should, of course, have called the police immediately after recognizing the event was no longer under his control, and halted it until the police arrived.

2) Why did university officials ask the organizers to relocate the presentation even though police officers were on hand? Because they feared that the police would physically remove or, even, arrest protesters who continued to disrupt it. They preferred avoiding that result to letting the event continue on Saint Mary's property.

3) Why has Saint Mary's University responded so weakly both to the disruption and to Security's failure to safeguard a campus event?

Besides the evasions and half-truths of the press release and Mr Bridges's comments to a newspaper, the university's administration has said nothing publicly. (The university might be in the process of disciplining a student for encouraging the disruption, though she herself was not part of it.) Saint Mary's President Colin Dodds has refused to invite Jose Ruba back to campus to give his presentation. Dr Dodds commissioned a report on the events, but declines to release it.

Administrators at Saint Mary's are unwilling to recognize their mistakes, let alone to try to correct them. It seems they have gone on to make one more: now, Mr Promaine recently told me, orders are that should trouble break out, he is to call a senior administrator, and not himself to call the police.

Most worrisome is that the university has given us no reason to think it will commit itself to protecting controversial campus events. Signs are that it will seek to prevent them from occurring.

The university acted badly in the days and weeks following the disruption not, I think, or not mainly, because the president and administrators themselves think the disruption justified, though given our university's constant rhetoric about providing a safe learning environment for all, that's a part of it. The central reason is fear and pandering. The president and others, I think, fear that speaking against the disruption would upset those who supported it, and those who supported it are many and active on campus. Who needs that headache, when all that's at stake is Saint Mary's integrity as a university.