

What would Socrates do?

Ottawa *Citizen* (under the headline “In responding to rape chant, Saint Mary’s betrayed its identity”), Monday 10 September 2013

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Suppose that one night during a university’s orientation week, about eighty senior students led three- or four-hundred newcomers in a chant celebrating child rape. What should the university do?

Certainly not what Saint Mary’s University did (“Saint Mary’s University shocked after video of ‘sexist’ frosh chant: spokesman,” *Citizen*, 4 September).

Saint Mary’s did three things, as indicated in the response by Colin Dodds, the president of Saint Mary’s, posted on the university’s website. In doing each of these things, though, Saint Mary’s has betrayed its identity as a university, as a place, that is, of free enquiry and intellectual community.

First, it said that the students who participated in the chant violated the university’s commitment to the values of equality and respect.

Now there’s much to be said about the students involved—about their judgement and, perhaps, about their commitment to those two values. But they did not discriminate against anyone or show disdain for any particular person. Thus, they did not violate either equality or respect.

Second, Saint Mary’s sentenced the participants to sensitivity training and the students’ association executive to a conference on consent and sexual assault. It’s not optional; the students involved are required to attend these sessions.

Equality and respect, one would be right to think, involve letting people make up their own minds about things. Using propaganda or pressure to get them to believe or do what you would like them to do is not to let them make up their own minds, but to manipulate them. A university that valued equality and respect would not force students into re-education camps.

As well, by punishing the students for chanting their ode to rape, Saint Mary’s is denying them the freedom peacefully to express themselves. Saint Mary’s is declaring that there are some things we may not say, some ideas that may not be uttered.

Third, Saint Mary’s will convene a council charged with finding ways to prevent sexual assault and harassment on campus and ensure that students can feel safe and respected.

Why sexual assault? Why harassment? No one was assaulted, no one harassed. Why not include find ways to prevent hockey injuries? It would be just as relevant to the occasion.

Since the university is prepared to coerce its students into a proper appreciation (proper by its lights) of respect and equality and to punish them for what they merely said, no good can come of this council. We can expect that it will recommend restrictions on assembly and expression, and penalties for non-compliance.

We Santamarians were disgusted by the chant and shocked by the callousness or cluelessness of the chanters—and stunned by the fact that they numbered in the hundreds. But rather than giving up our identity as a university by punishing people and restricting civil liberties on campus, we should address the situation by drawing on that very identity.

We at a university are intellectuals or aspiring intellectuals. What do intellectuals do? They talk, they theorize, they discuss, they criticise, they argue. They seek through free and unforced exchange to separate truth from falsehood and sound values from unsound. Crucially, they want themselves and others not only to believe truly and to value soundly, but to do so for their own reasons.

A university conscious of its identity and committed to it would not punish anyone for saying something, no matter how disgusting or callous, and would never send a person to be re-educated. It would rather, create fora in which to discuss whether and how what was said was disgusting or callous. It would leave people free to participate or not and to agree with their colleagues and classmates or not.

If Saint Mary's were conscious of and secure in its identity, the president of the university would be organizing discussion groups and calling on professors to lead them. Those professors who have studied such matters as group behaviour, rape, and the role of peers and culture in shaping our attitudes and actions might suggest well-researched and provocative articles for us to read. To create fora and to call on the professors would be to address the situation by drawing on the university's own natural resources.

Instead of following Socrates, as a university should, Saint Mary's has chosen to follow Tomas de Torquemada.

Socrates, the rude and annoying Greek philosopher of the 5th century BCE, was always keen to engage in critical discussion. Implicit in his method was the thought that if we discuss the problem thoroughly, we stand a good chance of seeing our way to solve it. Torquemada, the 15th century CE grand inquisitor, on the other hand, didn't have time for talk, and a mere good chance wasn't good enough. When up against heresy, forget discussion, place your trust in authority and punishment.