

Catholic League Subway Ad Explodes in Controversy

By William A. Donohue



It all began on January 19th. That was the day the Catholic League registered its criticisms of the New York City subway ads posted by the Gay Men's Health Crisis, a radical homosexual outfit. The posters included pictures of young people of the same sex kissing each other, complete with photos of condoms and dental dams. The legend "Young! Hot! Safe!" was meant to convey a message that teenagers can have all the sex they want and not worry about a thing, just as long as condoms are used. Karen Lynn Krugh and I challenged the conventional wisdom on radio and TV and gave thought to having our own ad campaign. Now it's almost ready to start and the media are already going ballistic. Here's what happened.

On January 19th, while discussing the gay ad on FOX TV with former New York City Mayor Ed Koch, I rhetorically asked whether the time had come for the Catholic League to sponsor its own ad. My objections centered on the usurpation of parental rights that the gay ads embodied. Was it not the business of Catholic parents – and not gay activists – to decide what, when and how their children learned about sex? Ed Koch replied that yes, the Catholic League should run its own ads, if that is what it wanted. I left the studio still undecided. My indecision, however, didn't last long.

Before the day was over, I had been asked by newsmen whether I was serious about launching our own ad campaign. I said yes, I was giving it very serious consideration. Again that evening, while discussing this issue for two hours on a local radio show, I was asked several times by callers whether the Catholic League would respond in kind to the Gay Men's Health Crisis. All were urging me to post our own ads. By that point I just couldn't say no. There would be a campaign, and it would be an aggressive one, intentionally designed to start a public dialogue on the wonders of condoms.

Our ad has a straightforward message: "Want to Know a Dirty Little Secret? CONDOMS DON'T SAVE LIVES. But Restraint Does. Only fools think condoms are foolproof. Remember, better safe than sorry."

Once the media knew we were going to post our own ad, they wouldn't let go. They knew we were on to something big – that our ad would create quite a stir – and they were right. On April 25th, we formally announced that our ad would begin June 1st. The reaction: we were besieged with calls, both positive and negative. More important, we experienced our biggest media blitz since the MTA's Madonna poster last fall. Radio, television, newspapers, wire services – they called for interviews locally, nationally and internationally (England and Japan). It was clear that our ad had hit home with a lot of people.

The difference between our ad and the one featured by the Gay Men's Health Crisis is striking. We speak to values and they don't. They profess a faith in technology and we ask for changes in human behavior. We admonish restraint and they talk about what's "Hot." Their ads are provocative and offensive. Ours are provocative without being offensive. Our ad is countercultural and their's is, sadly, the voice of the culture. But that's all the more reason to speak up and provide leadership.

I am convinced that most Americans would endorse our ad more than the gay ad. It is high time that we break the monopoly that gay activists, Planned Parenthood and others have had on the issue of sex education. Our ad speaks to more than Catholics, it speaks to Americans of all religions who are tired of the “just give ‘em condoms” approach to sexuality.

Judging from the success of this ad, even before it actually appears, it is plain that it won't be our last. Our side has been taking it for far too long. We hope to change that, and one way to do it is through the medium of public service messages. And unlike the ads of our critics, our messages truly do provide a public service.