

CMU APOLOGIZES FOR “NAKED POPE”

A female student at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) dressed as the pope while appearing naked from the waist down at the annual art school parade. Her pubic hair was shaved in the shape of a cross; she passed out condoms to the public. Administrators are reviewing this incident to see “if our community standards or laws were violated.”

At that time, Catholic League president Bill Donohue raised several questions about what happened. For one thing, he noted that the university did not have to ponder what to do regarding an earlier recent incident involving one of its fraternities: it simply suspended the students, as well as the entire Beta Theta Pi fraternity, for taking sexual pictures and videos inside the frat house and then emailing them to other members. An investigation was underway. But when it came to a female student who walked the streets naked from the waist down while mocking the pope, the administrators were much more relaxed. She was not suspended during a probe of this matter.

“The Freedom of Expression Policy” at CMU prizes individual expression, but it is not absolute: it explicitly ties rights to responsibilities. Perhaps most important, the “Carnegie Mellon Code” says students “are expected to meet the highest standards of personal, ethical and moral conduct possible.” It would seem axiomatic that the offending student violated these strictures.

Donohue argued that if CMU were to tolerate this incident, invoking no sanctions whatsoever, then it would open a door it may well regret. What, he asked, if instead of shaved pubic hair in the shape of a cross, a student chooses to depict a swastika?

CMU's decision not to suspend this female student, who publicly ridiculed Catholics and violated the local ordinance on public nudity, while invoking sanctions against the frat boys for offensive behavior behind closed doors, was legally problematic and morally indefensible.

Later CMU president Jared Cohon did apologize for the incident. His apology was sincere and much appreciated. A final resolution of this incident was not made, so it was too early to say whether CMU would treat this "highly offensive" act, as Cohon put it, the way it would resolve a pending case involving fraternity students and sex videos.

Donohue responded: "To treat the female incident in a less severe manner would raise questions about CMU's sensitivity to anti-Catholicism, and would also put into play the issue of gender discrimination. We look forward to a just resolution to both of these indefensible incidents."

A week later Cohon released a statement explaining that campus police had filed misdemeanor charges against the offending student, as well as two others. His letter balanced the need for freedom of expression with a commitment to fighting intolerance.

That is fine, but Cohon discredits real artistic merit when he says the student "made an artistic statement that proved to be controversial." Donohue commented: "There is nothing artistic about this infantile anti-Catholic insult. But we appreciate his willingness not to dodge this issue."