

# League Pressures N.Y. Store To Remove Offensive Creche

On December 9, 1994, the Catholic League successfully pressured Barneys New York, an upscale clothing store, into removing an offensive nativity scene from its storefront window on Madison Avenue and 61st Street. The exhibit, entitled "Hello Kitty Nativity Scene," was the work of artist Tom Sachs.

The display was a crude characterization, one that featured three Bart Simpson dolls as the Three Wise Men and vulgarized kittens as Mary and Jesus. Mary was posed with her legs spread apart wearing an undergarment that left six nipples in evidence; Jesus was adorned with a beanie and a halo was placed over his head. Both Mary and Jesus had rods extending from their cheeks, apparently representing whiskers. Hanging over the middle of the stable was the red and yellow McDonald's symbol.

The display was part of an auction conducted by Christie's, the famous New York auction house. Monies from the exhibit were to fund scholarships for the Children's Storefront school in Harlem and the Little Red School House in Greenwich Village.

The League had no objection to the purpose of the auction, only with the content of one of the exhibits.

After receiving many calls about the creche, Catholic League president William A. Donohue viewed the display himself and promptly registered a complaint with both Barneys and Christie's. The person he spoke to at Christie's apparently had not seen the exhibit, but a woman at Barneys admitted that there had been several complaints. Donohue informed her that she had "about four hours" to have a senior person from

Barneys contact the League, otherwise the media would be contacted.

It didn't take long before Simon Doonan, a senior vice president in charge of creative services, called Donohue and extended an apology. However, Doonan flatly declined to do anything about the exhibit. He said that he did not want to interfere with the expression of the artist. Donohue asked him if he would display the art work of a Klansman who portrayed blacks or Jews in a predictable fashion. Doonan said that he would, stating that nothing was more important than the right of artists to express themselves.

Dr. Donohue then released the following statement to the media:

"Barneys New York and Christie's have cooperated in promoting an insulting anti-Christian exhibit. This is not the first time Barneys has done this. Simon Doonan, who is in charge of display and advertising for Barneys, previously hung condoms from a Christmas tree. Indeed when Doonan was hired by Barneys president Gene Pressman, it was on the grounds that Doonan be allowed to promote 'irreverence.' That he has chosen to target Christians to vent his irreverence is quite obvious.

"Doonan made it clear to me that Barneys will exercise absolutely no responsibility for anything that any artist submits for display in its windows. Plainly put, this means that Barneys will respect the right of artists to show disrespect for the rights of Catholics.

"The Catholic League will disseminate this news to as wide an audience as possible. We do not accept Mr. Doonan's apology: apologies unaccompanied by corrective action do not assuage."

Within hours of releasing this statement, the television cameras were in Dr. Donohue's office. Just about every radio and television station in New York commented on the Barneys exhibit, and virtually all those who editorialized on

the subject supported the Catholic League's position. On the Bob Grant radio show, Dr. Donohue urged listeners to call Barneys and register their outrage. They did so in abundance, so much so that Barneys pulled the display from the window.

Originally, Barneys set the exhibit aside for private viewing, but because the reaction of New Yorkers was unrelenting, they finally decided to remove it altogether, giving the work back to the artist. But even that didn't satisfy New Yorkers: they continued to complain to Barneys. In response to all this, Barneys took out full page ads in the *New York Times*, *New York Post* and *New York Daily News*, apologizing for what had happened. The ads, together with the boycotts that were instituted, wound up costing Barneys hundreds of thousands of dollars in lost sales.