

MILWAUKEE ART MUSEUM SPONSORS HATE SPEECH

On July 30, the Milwaukee Art Museum featured an offensive portrait of Pope Benedict XVI that was made up of 17,000 colored condoms. It was initially scheduled for display in November, but museum officials decided to move the exhibit to a summer date.

Bill Donohue unleashed a public letter to the chairman of the museum, Kenneth Krei, and to Michael Durney, the CEO of DHi Group, a New York firm. Both men are associated with officials who have vigorously defended this hate speech. Donald W. Layden, Jr. is the president of the museum, and David Gordon is a past director and CEO of the facility who now sits on the board of directors at DHi.

Donohue zeroed in on a remark by Layden that was entirely unpersuasive. "This was never intended to be derisive, mocking or disrespectful of the pope," Layden said. Donohue questioned, "Was it intended to be a love letter? If I sent him a portrait of his mother, nicely spliced together with condoms, would he be convinced if I said it wasn't meant to be derisive? Can we at least stop the posturing and get serious?"

Gordon minced no words speaking of artist Nicki Johnson's portrayal of the pope: "It is a work that offends the Catholic Church. So be it." To which Donohue replied: "Then why doesn't this brave man ask an anti-Muslim bigot to do a portrait of Muhammad woven with condoms? Would he have the guts to tell Muslims that if they are offended, too damn bad?"

Donohue did not fail to address the artist, Nicki Johnson. She said she was angry at Pope Benedict XVI because he counseled abstinence-based programs in Africa to fight AIDS, not condom distribution. Donohue said she was right about the pope's

position, but wrong to suggest that it was empirically inaccurate. Donohue was pointed in his response.

"After the pope made his remarks," Donohue wrote, "it was the subject of analysis by Edward C. Green, then the director of the AIDS Prevention Research Project at the Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies. 'In every African country in which HIV infections have declined,' he said, 'this decline has been associated with a decrease in the proportion of men and women reporting more than one sex partner over the course of a year—which is exactly what fidelity programs promote.'"

Donohue then addressed the utility of condoms. "What about condoms? Don't they work? 'If AIDS prevention is to be based on evidence rather than ideology or bias,' Green said, 'then fidelity and abstinence programs need to be at the center of programs for general populations.' Does this mean the pope was right? Yes. Green argued that 'in truth, current empirical evidence supports him.'"

Donohue explained why the artist is angry. "Johnson is also miffed because the Catholic Church has had its greatest effect in sub-Saharan Africa, and that, she says, is where people are dying of AIDS the fastest. She is half right. As Green demonstrated, it is precisely in that part of Africa where *both* condoms and AIDS thrive. The success stories, which are built on the Catholic model, are in places such as Uganda."

The issue of public funding was cited by Donohue in a second news release on this issue.

At the federal level, the National Endowment for the Arts gave this museum an \$80,000 grant during the period of August 2008 to April 2010. In addition, it received \$212,500 in federal aid from other sources. Statewide, it receives monies from the Wisconsin Arts Board; it was given \$17,500 in fiscal year 2015. At the local level, it receives funding from the Milwaukee Arts Board for some exhibitions.

We contacted public officials at the state and local level about this abuse of funds. Government should be in the business of fighting bigotry, not underwriting it.

“Anti-Catholic art is always objectionable,” Donohue said, “but it is doubly so when it is publicly funded. Catholics in Wisconsin should not be forced to have their hard-earned dollars underwrite a museum that denigrates their religion. If Catholics are forbidden from erecting a nativity scene on public property, the state should be forbidden from funding speech that trashed Catholicism.”

It is always encouraging when the local Ordinary steps into these culture wars. In this regard, the strong condemnation of this exhibit by Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome ListECKi was hard to beat.

Archbishop ListECKi hit it out of the park: “Would the art museum accept works that depicted various political leaders in our state in cow dung (a significant animal for Wisconsin?)...Would they accept art featuring national or international popular social reconstructionists in a manner that would depict the opposite of what they represented, such as Ghandi sporting an uzi, Lincoln in Ku Klux Klan garb or Hitler with a yarmulke reading the Torah, all in the name of art and beauty?”

Milwaukee, and the people of Wisconsin, are lucky to have such a courageous archbishop. They deserve better. Shame on the Milwaukee Art Museum for ripping off the public to support this juvenile exhibit. If they think this is art, then it is proof positive that their discernment abilities are shot.