

NORTHERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY PULLS OFFENSIVE ART EXHIBIT

After a protest that included local Catholics, legislators and the Catholic League, Northern Kentucky University withdrew its plans to present an offensive art exhibit entitled, "Immaculate Misconceptions."

The furor began last winter when the Art Department at the state school announced that it would go forward with the exhibit. Immediately, Sisters of the St. Joseph the Worker at St. William Convent in Walton, Kentucky took their case to university officials. So did some influential state legislators, including State Senator Richard L. "Dick" Roeding, chairman of the Northern Kentucky Legislative Caucus.

State legislators threatened to withhold money from the university's proposed \$35 million natural sciences center unless the title was dropped. The university agreed to do this in March, but in April the Art Department openly defied the school's administration and said it would go ahead with the exhibit without changing the title.

Barbara Houghton, chairman of the Art Department, said that the featured artists had all been raised as Roman Catholics and simply wanted to display work inspired by the misconceptions they had while learning the faith. Ellen Zahorec, the art professor who was coordinating the event, admitted that she did not plan to screen the exhibit for anti-Catholic material.

The proposal for the art exhibit left little doubt, however, that what was to be presented was clearly defamatory. Here is a sample, taken from the proposal, of what was to be on display.

"The coordinator will create a larger body of work called

'Reliquaries, Stations, and Reconciliations' which will deal with the issues of recovering and re-emerging Catholics, sacred versus secular themes that challenge her personal belief system. Works will serve as an exorcism of sort in an effort to free the artist from misguided fears created by stringent dogmatic concepts that were learned and misconceived. Traditional religious imagery will be used in forms not usually found within a church context.

"The pieces will integrate mundane objects of everyday life into devotional pieces similar in manner to folk art traditions of worship. The fifteen stations will commemorate significant personal and universal events of 'The Good Little Catholic Girl' and will focus more on Catholicism from a female view. The support for the stations will be antique ironing boards and each station will include a specific ritual for the viewer to meditate upon as they move through the transitions."

On April 17, Catholic League president William Donohue sent a letter to the president of the university demanding that both the title and the exhibit be withdrawn. (See box below.)

On April 29, less than two weeks after receiving Dr. Donohue's letter, the school decided to drop the entire exhibit, title and all.

April 17, 1996

Dr. Leon Boothe
President
Northern Kentucky University
Nunn Drive
Highland Heights, Kentucky 41099-8002

Dear President Boothe:

I am writing with regard to the art exhibit, "Immaculate Misconception." My concerns are not simply with the title,

but with the exhibition itself.

I have spent most of my adult life as an academic (indeed I still sit on the board of directors of the National Association of Scholars), and as such I have deep respect for academic freedom. But I also cherish academic responsibility. As president of the nation's largest Catholic civil rights organization, I have other interests as well: the Catholic League defends individual Catholics and the institutional Church from defamation and discrimination.

In the interest of respect for diversity and tolerance for all segments of our society, I implore you to dissuade the Art Department from going forward with this exhibition. It is one thing to engage in reasoned dialogue expressing criticisms of the Catholic religion, quite another to feature the art work of those who have an animus against Catholicism. I can't believe for a minute that blasphemous exhibitions would be tolerated against a religion of Native Americans. We expect the same treatment.

I have enclosed copies of our monthly publication, Catalyst, which reaches over 200,000 of our members, including every Congressman and Bishop in the nation. Also enclosed is a copy of our Annual Report on Anti-Catholicism.

I await a response from you before going any further.

Sincerely,
William A. Donohue
President

cc: Hon. Richard L. "Dick" Roeding, Chair, Northern Kentucky Legislative Caucus
Hon. Royce W. Adams, Co-Chair, Northern Kentucky Legislative Caucus
Steve Balch, president, National Association of Scholars
Patrick Foye, General Counsel, Catholic League.