

SANTA FE MUSEUM OUTRAGES LOCAL CATHOLICS

If the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, wasn't known internationally before its exhibition, "Cyber Arte: Where Tradition Meets Technology," it is now. And this is due exclusively to one entry, "Our Lady." It is a photo collage by Alma Lopez that replaces the traditional image of the Virgin Mary with a woman in a rose petal bikini; a bare-breasted woman appears below her in place of a cherub.

Local Catholics, led by Archbishop Michael Sheehan and parishioners from Our Lady of Guadalupe parish, protested the depiction as "blasphemous." The Catholic League also joined the fight. The museum is a state facility and is supervised by a board of regents. The exhibition began February 25.

The Catholic League's response was to focus on the museum's guidelines, calling attention to what seemed to be a clear violation of its own strictures. Here is how we phrased in a news release:

"The Museum of International Folk Art is unique in that it is fully-funded and operated by the state. It has a special obligation, therefore, not to use money from taxpayers for the purpose of abusing their racial, ethnic, religious or cultural affiliations. Moreover, the museum has its own guidelines and that is why the Catholic League has seized upon them in writing a letter to the board of regents.

"Section 7-C says the museum supports the expression of differing opinions 'in a reasonable manner.' Well, how reasonable is it to assault the sensibilities of a large portion of the local population? Section 9-A says all proposals must include 'descriptions of the intended audience.' We'd love to know their answer to this one. 9-A

also says that deliberation must take account of the 'impact on the community.' Shedding light on this would be a public service. Finally, curators are told to monitor the 'response to comments from the public.' Which is why the regents has its work cut out for it. Our advice? Observe separation of art and state."

The artist, Alma Lopez, said she was inspired by author and activist Sandra Cisneros. To be specific, Lopez was taken by Cisneros' expressed curiosity over what Catholic saints wore under their formal clothes.

When confronted by her critics, Lopez mentioned that many babies are breast-fed. "I wouldn't think that breasts are all that objectionable," she said, "unless somebody's looking at them in a sick way, in a perverted or sexualized kind of way." To Lopez, apparently there is no difference between breasts exposed in a medical textbook and those shown in a porn magazine.

In any event, on April 4, there was to be a public meeting to deal with the controversy. Some 800 people showed up, almost all of who were there to protest the artwork. Screaming, "Qué viva la raza!" (Long live the people!)", the Chicano protesters made mince meat out of Lopez's comment that she was being persecuted because she was Mexican. Indeed, the Chicanos explicitly denounced the elitist element to the public meeting because it had admitted a disproportionate number of Anglos like those from the local ACLU. Because most were shut out, the meeting was postponed to April 16.

Archbishop Sheehan kept the pressure on saying that "Our Lady" depicts the mother of Jesus "as if she were a tart." Then, in a comment that sounded right off the pages of *Catalyst*, he opined, "No one would dream of putting Martin Luther King in Speedos and desecrating his memory."

At the April 16 meeting, the crowd filled a 1,200-seat hall to

capacity. Leading those opposed to the artwork was Deacon Anthony Trujillo of Our Lady of Guadalupe parish. "We're not the powerful; we're not the rich," he shouted. "We're simply the people who have a strong belief in Our Lady."

Perhaps the most cogent comment came from Pastor Terry Brennan of Holy Trinity in Arroyo Seco. He urged the museum to remove "Our Lady," arguing that by doing so they would be following in the footsteps of Wal-Mart which had recently decided not to sell a book about Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber. Father Brennan also compared the museum treatment of the Virgin of Guadalupe to a sports team callously using Indian mascots. At the end of the day, it was still not decided what would be done about the art in question.

Remarkably, one defender of the controversial display, Bill Tammeus of the *Kansas City Star*, actually compared the objections by Archbishop Sheehan to the behavior of the Taliban leaders in Afghanistan. William Donohue replied to Tammeus as follows: "Now let me see if I understand this. If a Catholic bishop objects to having Catholic citizens pay for art that assaults their sensibilities in a state-run institution then he is analogous to terrorists who destroy ancient religious statues, smash priceless archaeological treasures and stone to death adulterers."

Donohue concluded by saying, "Over the past few decades, many authors have made embarrassing contributions to the politics of moral equivalency, but this effort by Tammeus tops them all." Tammeus writes for the same newspaper that concocted the now discredited sex survey of Catholic priests.