

SERRANO'S LAST STAND AT THE SMITHSONIAN

In the last issue of *Catalyst*, we printed a letter from Dr. Donohue to David Umansky, Communications Director of the Smithsonian Institution, protesting the institution's invitation to artist Andres Serrano to open Hispanic Heritage Month. Our objection centered on the anti-Catholic work of Serrano, specifically his contribution, "Piss Christ," which features a crucifix submerged in a jar of urine. It was the league's position that Serrano was unfit to be accorded the right to open Hispanic Heritage Month at the prestigious institution, located in our nation's capital.

In an unusually frank letter to Dr. Donohue, J. Dennis O'Connor, Provost of the Smithsonian, wrote to explain the Smithsonian's position and to convey to him the future of Andres Serrano's welcome at the institution.

O'Connor said to Dr. Donohue that "I share your concern," and then indicated that the Smithsonian "must be careful not to appear to be censoring free speech or restricting public debate." But he also said that the committee that selected Serrano "was aware of the earlier controversy surrounding Mr. Serrano's work." Accordingly, the committee "sought assurances from both him [Serrano] and his assistant that he would discuss his recent work, avoid his controversial series, and exchange views with other panelists." Serrano's "controversial series" includes exhibitions involving dead animals, brains, blood and urine.

Serrano initially agreed to abide by the Smithsonian's request, saying that he wanted to move beyond the controversies of the past. O'Connor states that "The employees [of the Smithsonian] would not have suggested inviting Mr. Serrano without believing that he would avoid showing his

controversial works that had offended so many in previous years and that he would present a program appropriate for a general invitation audience.”

But Serrano reneged on his commitment. Here is what O’Connor concluded: “Since this program’s occurrence, I have gathered a good deal of information about its background and actual development, and I believe that Mr. Serrano violated his understanding with the Hispanic Heritage Planning Committee. As a result, I would be extremely reluctant to consider such an invitation to him in the future, and have conveyed this judgment to the staff.”

The Catholic League regrets that Serrano was invited in the first place, and is hardly surprised that the artist violated his word. But we are nonetheless pleased with the position of the Smithsonian not to invite him ever again.