

SMITHSONIAN MADNESS

FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK

William Donohue

By now, everyone knows that we objected to the video that showed large ants crawling all over Jesus on the Cross, but what is less well known is that this "contribution" to art was just one piece of a gay and lesbian exhibition. For the record, I did not know that gays were associated with this venture when I complained to a reporter, and even if I did, it matters not a whit whether the offensive video was part of an exhibition created by heterosexuals or homosexuals. But, of course, I was branded anti-gay anyway.

Andrew Sullivan, a gay writer, wrote, "Maybe what is truly offensive to Donohue is the notion that gay men might actually seek refuge in Jesus' similar experience of marginalized, stigmatized agony." That would not be easy to do considering I did not know this was the work of gays. Christopher Knight, the art critic for the Los Angeles Times, said criticism of the Smithsonian exhibition amounted to "anti-gay bullying," noting that the criticism was coming on the heels of gay teens who committed suicide! Frank Rich of the New York Times said my "religious" objections (his quote marks) were nothing more than "a perfunctory cover for the homophobia" that drove my complaint. Don't you just love the Freudian analysis?

It's time these men grew up. Not everything is about them. So wrapped up in the issue of gay rights that they cannot fathom how anyone could object to irreligious art that is part of a larger gay exhibit without being anti-gay. They need to step back and take a deep breath. It is precisely the narcissism of people like Sullivan, Knight and Rich that allows them to see the world through one set of lenses, tightly fitted, condemning anyone who doesn't share their view.

The gay art themes that I did not comment on, but which my critics adored, were nicely captured by Michael Medved, an Orthodox Jew and an astute student of American culture. The Smithsonian exhibition, he wrote, featured such lovely fare as "transvestitism, fetishism, sado-masochism, photographs of AIDS-ravaged corpses, full frontal male nudity," and the like. All funded by you.

The complaint that I lodged—simply asking members of Congress to "reconsider federal funding" of the Smithsonian—led to forums organized to denounce the Catholic League in places like London, Los Angeles and New York. There were street demonstrations in New York and Washington, and many cities hosted the vile video in local art galleries. To these people, art is more than an expression—it functions as an ersatz religion.

Some liberal Catholics rushed to defend the exhibition. U.S. Catholic magazine said plainly that the ants-on-Jesus video was "not an assault on religion." Catholics United, a radical left-wing group, accused me of "manufacturing" the entire controversy for my "end-of-the-year fundraising efforts." When someone made a similar charge on radio, I responded by saying, "Not only did I arrange this whole thing, those are my ants." Catholics for Choice, which specializes in Catholic bashing, weighed in against me and in favor of the video. And the National Catholic Reporter sided with Frank Rich against me, asking its readers to "pray for the conversion of our brother William." Sounds very fundamentalist to me.

Of all the issues involved in this controversy, the two that strike me as the most salient are the incredible insouciance shown to Christians offended by the art, and the equally incredible arrogance evinced by those who insist that their interpretation is the only correct one. Over and over again, we looked for just one of these art mavens to give us a genuflection, a quick recognition that Christians might justly feel abused by the ant crawlers. But, no, we were told we are

too ignorant to catch its true meaning.

Stephen Prothero teaches courses on religion at Boston University, and he found the ant crawlers “deeply theological,” asking those who were offended whether they would be offended if the ants crawled on Christopher Hitchens. Yes, he actually said this. Another savant told us that the ants are “a metaphor for society because the social structure of the ant world is parallel to ours.” Now how about them apples! Charles Haynes of the Religious Freedom Education Project said that Washington Post art critic Blake Gopnik got it right when he said that the artist who created it intended to speak for his friend who died of AIDS. That went right over our heads as well. And an editorial in the Sacramento Bee said the art “could be seen as a modern take on the theme of divine suffering that has been the subject of Christian art for centuries.” Sure. And it could also be seen as hate speech.

Though I would prefer to go to a pub than a museum, and I strongly believe that the working class should not have to fund the leisure of the rich (they’re the typical museum-goers), at the end of the day I have more respect for what art is supposed to be than any of these charlatans. Indeed, their defense of the ant crawlers undermines their credibility. This Smithsonian madness proves it.