



CATHOLIC LEAGUE

*For Religious
and
Civil Rights*

July 1, 2015

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Mr. Kenneth C. Krei
Chairman
Milwaukee Art Museum
700 N. Art Museum Drive
Milwaukee, WI 53202

Mr. Michael Durney
CEO
DHi Group, Inc.
1040 Ave. of Americas
New York, NY 10018

Dear Mssrs. Krei and Durney:

As president of the nation's largest Catholic civil rights organization, I take seriously any expression of anti-Catholic bigotry. Regrettably, some of those who report to you are not innocent of this charge.

In November, the Milwaukee Art Museum will host an offensive exhibit by Niki Johnson: 17,000 colored condoms are used to portray Pope Benedict XVI.

I have said for decades that everyone in the U.S. has a legal right to insult my religion, but no one has a moral right to do so. Accordingly, I am not interested in suing the museum, nor would I support an effort to do so. But this does not empty the issue.

For one, there is the matter of using public funds, collected in part from Catholics, to bash Catholicism. I will deal with that issue at another time, but what I want to discuss with you now are the public comments made by Donald W. Layden, Jr., president of the museum, and David Gordon, past director and CEO of the museum and currently a member of the board of directors at DHi. I will also address the rationale of the artist.

"This was never intended to be derisive," said Layden, "mocking or disrespectful of the pope." 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?

Similarly, Layden justifies Johnson's assault by saying that the intent was "to have a conversation about AIDS and AIDS education." In other words, I am supposed to believe that such conversations cannot take place without intentionally stoking the flames of bigotry.

Interestingly, both Layden and Gordon commented on the museum's 2014 exhibit, "Of Heaven and Earth." It featured 500 years of Italian paintings, all of them reverential. One might think this is a good thing. But no, they caution, treating Catholicism with respect can be a real problem.

"Many people would say those works of art were beautiful in the Catholic and Christian tradition. But some people find that offensive, and I respect that view of the world, as well," Layden said.

This is astonishing, to say the least. Here we have a man employed to nurture respect for the arts, and he cannot distinguish between some of the greatest art in Western civilization and those unable to appreciate it. Perhaps I am being too kind. Maybe the detractors are not ignorant—maybe they are just old-fashioned bigots. One thing is for sure: Layden's discernment abilities are shot altogether.

Gordon is more direct: he likes his depictions of Catholicism raw. He minces no words speaking of Johnson's portrayal of the pope: "It is a work that offends the Catholic Church. So be it." 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?

It does not help Gordon's reasoning to say that "[I]f an art museum is not offending some of the people some of the time, it is not doing its job: controversy is the food of democracy." This perverse understanding of art suggests that art and beauty not only bear no relationship, they are polar opposites. Just as mind-boggling is his adolescent statement about controversy and democracy: it is the pursuit of truth, not controversy, that

defines democracy. And it cannot go unsaid that Gordon's observation is a fraud: When was the last time the Milwaukee Art Museum deliberately inflamed the passions of anti-Semites or gay bashers?

DHi has a policy against discrimination and harassment (Section VIII of its Code of Conduct and Ethics). "Abusive, harassing or offensive conduct is unacceptable, whether verbal, physical or visual," it says. It would be instructive to learn why Gordon's "so-be-it" attitude toward visually offensive anti-Catholic fare is not a violation of this policy.

Nothing can justify bigotry, but it is even worse when the rationale is based on faulty data.

Johnson says she is angry at Pope Benedict XVI because he counseled abstinence-based programs in Africa to fight AIDS, not condom distribution. She is right about the pope's position, but she is wrong to suggest that it is empirically inaccurate.

After the pope made his remarks, 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."

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." He also took aim at the pope's critics. "We liberals who work in the fields of global HIV/AIDS and family planning take terrible professional risk if we side with the pope on a divisive topic such as this."

For the record, Green is not a closet Catholic conservative. He calls himself an "aging hippie who came of age in the 1960s," and boasts that he is "at least a two-star general in the Sixties Sexual Revolution."

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.

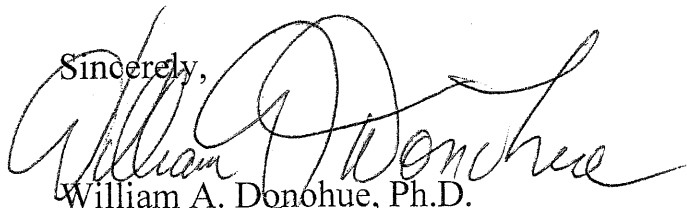
"What I want to do is really destigmatize the condom, normalize it," explains Johnson. I have news for her: in New York City the government has been giving away millions of condoms free of charge for years, the result being an increase in the rate of sexually transmitted diseases. The pattern never stops, year after year.

I do not care whether anyone associated with this issue puts aside his superstitions regarding condoms, but I do care about using public dollars to trash my religion. It is a sad day in America when well-educated people choose to feed the worst appetites of bigots, or when they violate the most elementary standards of decency.

Art that is intentionally designed to promote hatred is not endearing—it is hate speech, pure and simple. Lying about it is just as pernicious.

I would like to hear your thoughts on this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "William A. Donohue". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

William A. Donohue, Ph.D.

cc: Niki Johnson; Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome E. ListECKi