

CP U.S.

## NY Church Nixes Human Rights Art Festival Over LGBT Content

By Michael Gryboski , Christian Post Reporter

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(PHOTO: FR. ANDREW O'CONNOR)

Saint Mary Catholic Church, also called Saint Mary Grand, located in New York City.

A New York Catholic Church reversed its decision to host a human rights festival when organizers refused to remove pro-LGBT performances from the event.

The International Human Rights Art Festival was originally scheduled to be held at St. Mary Catholic Church. However, the group changed its venue due to including two performances, the pro-LGBT improv group Thank You For Coming Out and the transgender Maybe Burke.

Tom Block, founding producer of the International Human Rights Art Festival, told The Christian Post that they were informed of the cancellation a few days before the event, with the order coming straight from Archbishop Timothy Cardinal Dolan.

"We were told that while many of our acts did fit in with church orthodoxy and the church's commitment to social justice, two, (Thank You For Coming Out and Maybe Burke), conflicted with their faith," explained Block.

"The spokesman informed us that if we were willing to drop these two acts from the program, we would be more than welcome to hold the International Human Rights Art Festival at St. Mary's Church in New York's Lower East Side this Sunday, October 15 as planned."



(PHOTO: ELISA GUTIERREZ)

The LGBT-themed improvisation group Thank You For Coming Out, performing at St. Ann & the Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Brooklyn Heights, NY on Sunday, October 15, 2017.

The Arts Festival organizers refused to drop the two performances, with Block telling CP that they believe "that all people share the right to be heard."

"The International Human Rights Art Festival does not divide 'acceptable' justice issues from 'unacceptable.' We do not believe that some persecuted groups are less worthy than others," said Block.

"As such, the idea that some of our artists would go forward with the program while others were rejected, is antithetical to our mission, our belief and frankly, our faith: respect does not stop at the doorway to one or another segment of the population."

The event ended up taking place on Sunday at St. Ann & the Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Brooklyn Heights, which is located near the originally planned venue of St. Mary Church.

"We were very fortunate in that an Episcopal Church, St. Ann & the Holy Trinity Church in Brooklyn Heights, NY, and its open-hearted pastor, Father John Denaro, stepped into the breach within 24 hours and offered to house our event at the original time," noted Block.

"As the church was only about a couple miles from the original venue, we were able to inform our patrons of the move, and hold the event as scheduled — in a beautiful space in the sanctuary of the 150-year-old church."

Fr. Andrew O'Connor, pastor at St. Mary Catholic Church, explained to CP that his church had asked about content that might conflict with Catholic teaching, but that festival organizers "were late in confirming the arts groups and so we simply did not have a way to vet the selection before it was too late."

"There may be LGBT context that would work in our context. It requires a dialogue," said O'Connor, echoing the nuanced sentiment of many Catholic clergy and leaders.

"In this case there was simply no time to dialogue, especially regards to appealing to our direct community which could and should find a voice in the arts."

He told CP that had the event gone as planned, it would have been the first such festival held at his church.

"Our hall was a Bingo Hall until 2014 when our ceiling collapsed. We restored the hall and uncovered the 1831 foundations," said O'Connor. "It is very beautiful and a few groups in the arts community have discovered us: The Storm Theater, SoFarSounds and the Culture Project. We want to be a home for the arts."

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