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Festival Moves Event After Church Objects to Gay-Themed Content

By SHARON OTTERMAN OCT. 13, 2017

A human rights arts festival scheduled to take place on Sunday in a Lower East Side church hall was scrambling for a new venue after top officials of the New York Archdiocese expressed last-minute concerns that performances dealing with gay and transgender issues were not in line with church teaching.

Organizers of the International Human Rights Art Festival put out a news release about the event at St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church on Grand Street about a month ago. The festival included a comedy improvisation, "Thank You for Coming Out," about revealing gay identity, and a series of original cabaret songs by Maybe Burke, a transgender artist and activist.

The actress Kathleen Turner was scheduled to headline the event. Then, on Thursday, the pastor of St. Mary's contacted the festival's organizers to say that church officials, including Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan, the archbishop of New York, had expressed concern about the gay and transgender content of the show. Rather than remove the two pieces, the event's producer, Tom Block, decided to pull the entire event from the church.

"We are a human rights arts festival," Mr. Block said. "We are not going to abandon people."

The dispute comes at a time when the Roman Catholic Church as a whole is attempting to be more welcoming to the gay and transgender community, following the lead of Pope Francis. But there is a lingering tension in the church that extending a hand of welcome might come across as an endorsement of homosexuality, against church teaching..

“Sadly, many self-appointed Orthodoxy watchdog groups are focused on this,” said the Rev. James Martin, a Jesuit priest whose recent book about extending a welcome to gay Catholics had an enormous backlash. On the contrary, he added: “Hosting a play about coming out is not an endorsement, any more than hosting a Greek tragedy is an endorsement of murder and suicide.”

Father Andrew O’Connor, the administrator of St. Mary’s, said in an interview that he had recently received a call from Bishop John O’Hara, the vicar for Manhattan, expressing concern on behalf of himself and Cardinal Dolan about the gay and transgender-themed performances of the festival. He wanted Father O’Connor to speak to the producers to make sure that the material was appropriate for the Catholic Church.

Had there been more time, perhaps a compromise could have been worked out, Father O’Connor said. When Mr. Block asked him if the festival would be allowed as is, Father O’Connor said he told him “probably not,” and rather than ban some artists, Mr. Block decided to pull the show.

The last-minute rejection came as a shock to the festival’s artists.

“I think it’s absolutely, completely wrong,” Ms. Turner said. Deciding who should be heard and who silenced, she said, “is very much against the teaching of Christianity.”

The festival was being held under the auspices of another arts group, the Culture Project, which had recently signed a contract with St. Mary’s to use its 9,000-square-foot basement as its regular performance space.

Allan Buchman, the founder of the Culture Project, said he was told that he would have to be sensitive to the church in what he presented, but the example he was given was avoiding excessive profanity. He was not told, he said, that gay-themed work would be unacceptable.

Late Friday, organizers found a new venue: St. Ann & the Holy Trinity, an Episcopal church in Brooklyn Heights.

Joseph Zwilling, the spokesman for the archdiocese, emphasized that the bishops had not directly requested that the performances be removed, but said that the move was right in principle.

“Whenever parish property is used by an outside group of any sort, whether for a performance, speech, discussion, or other use, the expectation is that nothing would occur that would violate Catholic sensibilities and teaching,” he said.

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