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TESTING THE FAITH

Parish cancels 'Catholic' drag queens' bingo games Outcry leads to quashing of risqué event by 'Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence'

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A group of homosexual drag queens who dress up in outlandish nun costumes has lost its lease to hold risqué bingo games at a San Francisco parish after outcry from faithful Catholics throughout the United States. In September, the "Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence," a self-described "leading-edge order of queer nuns," began holding "Revival Bingo" games at Most Holy Redeemer parish in San Francisco's homosexual Castro neighborhood. The next game, featuring master of ceremonies "Peaches Christ" -- was scheduled for Thursday, All Souls Day, when Catholics typically pray for deceased loved ones.

The Sisters' motto "Go and sin some more" is indicative of their use of mockery to express opposition to Catholic moral norms. They are infamous for their offensive street theater, in which they use Catholic symbols and images to shock opponents and entertain allies. Catholics who walked in the West Coast Walk for Life in 2005 and 2006 report they were heckled and jeered with blasphemous catcalls by the group.

(Story continues below)

The bingo games came to light after a San Francisco reader posted information about them on Mark Shea's weblog. Catholics nationwide immediately began contacting the San Francisco archdiocese and Most Holy Redeemer parish to put a stop to the event.



A letter to the archdiocese posted to The Threshing Grain weblog cried, "I am so very scandalized by this behavior and ashamed that such deplorable and blasphemous actions would take place where the presence of OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST RESIDES -- the Tabernacle-IN HIS TEMPLE! I plan to alert the Vatican, the USCCB, and others of this unseemly and scandalous behavior against the BODY OF CHRIST."

Most Holy Redeemer is pastored by Father Stephen Meriwether, the chancellor of the San Francisco Archdiocese under Archbishop George Neideraurer. Father Meriwether was appointed to his current post by former Archbishop William Levada. Levada was elevated to the rank of cardinal by Pope Benedict XVI earlier this year and heads the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. According to a parish assistant, Father Meriwether was aware of the blasphemous bingo games.

Most Holy Redeemer parish has a long history of "pro-gay" activism. The parish regularly marches in the annual San Francisco "gay pride" parade, and its website displays photos of Pastor Meriwether blessing this year's "pride" participants. The parish's AIDS support group receives grant monies from the "Sisters."

A Sept. 14 article by "Sister Dana Van Iquity" in the homosexual newspaper San Francisco Bay Times stated, "The long awaited return of the Castro's longest running Bingo – Revival Bingo — kicked off at Ellard Hall on Sept. 7 at 100 Diamond Street and 18th [the address of Most Holy Redeemer] in the heart of the Castro. The new home includes more space, more seating capacity, a big stage, and a brand new sound & video system (thanks to Dave the bear) with all players on one main floor instead of having to hang from the rafters at the old venue. ... A gaggle of nuns -- dozens really -- opened the show, carrying candles and acting rather solemn with slow, marching steps. But when the sound system played 'Gonna Make You Sweat,' the Sisters commenced to clapping and dancing wildly down the aisles, getting everyone's energy up."

The article went on to describe sexual "punishments" meted out to participants whose cell phones ring during the game or who call a false bingo. Prizes distributed to winners, according to the article, range from "wines to porn DVDs to sex toys to toasters and more."

After the games were discovered late last week, Catholics across the country contacted the San Francisco Archdiocese to demand a stop to the perverse event. On Oct. 30, archdiocese spokesman Maurice Healy issued the following statement:

Permission to use Ellard Hall should not have been given to the [the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence]. The Archdiocese of San Francisco has directed the parish to end the arrangement immediately. For years the group has directed contempt and ridicule at Catholic faith and practices. The particular targets of the group's derision are women in religious communities, for whom Catholics, and many non-Catholics, have a special reverence and respect. Fr. Meriwether is on leave from his duties.

On October 31, the "Sisters" issued the following statement on their website confirming they lost their bingo lease at the parish hall:

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are stunned and deeply saddened by the Archdiocese of San Francisco's abrupt cancellation of their lease for Ellard Hall, the location of their charitable monthly bingo fundraising event.

The Sisters want to apologize to the organizations that depend on our support, including the AIDS Emergency Fund and the Positive Resource Center. Both of these worthy organizations were to be the recipients of this week's proceeds, however due to today's decision by the Archdiocese, we will no longer be able to hold bingo. The Sisters would also like to apologize to the SFPD Pride Foundation, UCSF AIDS Health Project, Saint James Infirmary and Tenderloin Tessies Holiday Feed, all of whom were scheduled to be beneficiaries for future bingos. And, of course, the Sisters extend our apologies and regrets to the many players who purchased tickets and were anticipating many more joyous evenings of fundraising.

The primary mission of The Sisters is involvement in and support of the local community. This includes working with and supporting many local community organizations whose ability to serve their constituency is dependent on contributions from charitable groups like the Sisters. Without the thousands of dollars raised by the consistently sold-out monthly bingo event, their services may be cut at a time when charitable giving is more critical than ever.

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence believe that our commitment to giving is in alignment with the philosophy of the Archdiocese of San Francisco, which represents a cross-section of the San Francisco population. It is unfortunate and extremely disappointing that this appears not to be the case, and that our shared values cannot overcome our differences of opinion when it comes to how we serve the community.

The Threshing Grain Catholic weblog commented, "I don't think that masquerading and parading around on Catholic diocesan church property blaspheming the Catholic Church and displaying this behavior near the Blessed Sacrament while on the same property is 'shared values'! The ends DO NOT justify the means! Charity!? Please! Where is their charity in their displayed and deplorable antics against Holy Mother Church and Christianity!?"

Archbishop Neideraurer was said to be unaware of the lease or the bingo games prior to late last week. It is not known if former Archbishop Levada was also unaware of them.

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Joni Durling, homeschool mother of six from the San Francisco Bay Area, is also a Catholic activist who is long time member of the Catholic Media Coalition. The Catholic Media Coalition is a nationwide group of publishers using print and electronic media aimed at restoring orthodoxy in the nation's dioceses. For more information see www.catholicmediacoalition.org
