

STATEMENT

Bishop P J Cullinane, President of the NZ Catholic Bishops' Conference

The hurt

It was a matter of great sadness and deep hurt to the Catholic community that icons of their faith - sacred taonga - were suborned to other people's agendas, for promoting social change, and generating publicity for the museum.

Our case against this affront does not ultimately depend on the artist's or the museum's intentions. Whatever their intentions, it was their actions that seemed to us, and to many other New Zealanders, to trivialise and ridicule our beliefs.

Many felt the need to protest against the museum's action by making their presence strongly felt. The Catholic bishops preferred dialogue and debate; in the end, neither method obtained the result we were looking for.

Our sense of powerlessness and frustration was heightened when the agreed debate was delayed for more than three weeks.

Many of those who protested through the media pointed out that the museum would not have treated the religious beliefs or cultural traditions of other groups in such a blatantly insensitive way. It was hard to avoid the impression of a double standard.

The Museum's Constitutional Obligations

It is the view of many that the Board failed in its constitutional duty to "*endeavour to ensure that the museum is a cause of pride for all New Zealanders*" (Section 8, (c)). The Board's unwillingness to make even a gesture of goodwill towards Christians for Holy Week, or even for Good Friday, is hardly consistent with its duty to ensure "*that the museum expresses and recognises the mana and significance of our major traditions and cultural heritages*" (Section 8 (b)).

The museum's Board may yet have to deal with this issue because the right of artists to challenge people's beliefs and the right of museums to be forums for that kind of debate are being interpreted in a way that allows gross insensitivity.

The Underlying Issue

For us the issue was not about the right of artists and museums to stimulate reflection and discussion. We would welcome serious discussion of the issues that Tania Kovats raises. The underlying issue concerns the conditions which make debate possible, viz respect for people. Deep respect for one another is a pre-requisite for being able to live together with our differences, and to engage one another in meaningful debate.

In the parliament, views are challenged and vigorously debated, but within the limits of not insulting those who hold the opposing views. Insult must be withdrawn, or the offender leave the chamber, before the debate can continue.

New Zealanders feel strongly about this distinction. That is why such a disparate group as Catholics, former Catholics, Catholics who dissent from some of the Church's teaching, evangelical Christians who do not share Catholic belief concerning Mary, members of the Jewish community, the Islamic community, "free-thinking non-Christians" and many others, chose - despite all the differences between them - to protest against "this blatant insult".

In this unprecedented display of unity, they were trying to tell the museum that it is one thing to challenge people's beliefs, and another to insult the people who hold them.

Nor is it for artists or museums to tell others what should or should not offend them. That depends on what is sacred to them - whether they are Maori, Hindu, Jewish or Catholic - without discrimination.

The Challenge

The challenge in all this is to artists and museums: to find ways of questioning people's views without insulting the people who hold them. It is not good enough just to challenge. To combine challenge with respect is more difficult, and that is where the artist and the museum failed.

Any assumption by artists or museum that the distinction between challenge and insult does not apply to them belongs to a very recent ideology, which they are hardly entitled to foister on New Zealanders who have shown that they will stand up for that distinction.

Conflicting Cultures

The placing of a condom over the face and the figure of the Virgin effectively pits one culture against another: the culture of greater sexual licence with its need for protection against the consequences (symbolised by the condom), over against the culture of chastity (symbolised by Mary).

It is not Mary who gets hurt in this conflict; it is the people who grow up in a culture that widely rejects chastity and desperately tries to protect itself against the consequences.

It is not enough just to try to avoid consequences. We need to address causes. Wherever people's lives are being damaged by false ideologies, false values or oppressive social and economic policies, we will take our stand on respect for people and for life, truth, chastity and social justice.

The idea that condoms can substitute for chastity is a massive deception and people's lives are diminished by it. Using our sacred icons to promote false values adds insult to that injury.