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Harvard president to attend holy hour, not black mass

Dennis Coday | May. 12, 2014 NCR Today

Harvard's president, Drew Faust, says in statement released to day that while the student-run Harvard Extension Cultural Studies Club stages a Satanic ?black mass? as an educational experiment, she will be attending a "Eucharistic Holy Hour and Benediction at St. Paul's Church on [Harvard] campus ... to join others in reaffirming our respect for the Catholic faith at Harvard and to demonstrate that the most powerful response to offensive speech is not censorship, but reasoned discourse and robust dissent."

Thanks President Faust. The full text of the statement follows:

Statement on 'Black Mass'

May 12, 2014
Cambridge, Mass.

A statement by President Drew Faust

The reenactment of a 'black mass' planned by a student group affiliated with the Harvard Extension School challenges us to reconcile the dedication to free expression at the heart of a university with our commitment to foster a community based on civility and mutual understanding. Vigorous and open discussion and debate are essential to the pursuit of knowledge, and we must uphold these values even in the face of controversy. Freedom of expression, as Justice Holmes famously said long ago, protects not only free thought for those who agree with us but freedom for the thought that we hate.

But even as we permit expression of the widest range of ideas, we must also take responsibility for debating and challenging expression with which we profoundly disagree. The 'black mass' had its historical origins as a means of denigrating the Catholic Church; it mocks a deeply sacred event in Catholicism, and is highly offensive to many in the Church and beyond. The decision by a student club to sponsor an enactment of this ritual is abhorrent; it represents a fundamental affront to the values of inclusion, belonging and mutual respect that must define our community. It is deeply regrettable that the organizers of this event, well aware of the offense they are causing so many others, have chosen to proceed with a form of expression that is so flagrantly disrespectful and inflammatory.

Nevertheless, consistent with the University?s commitment to free expression, including expression that may deeply offend us, the decision to proceed is and will remain theirs. At the same time, we will vigorously protect the right of others to respond?and to address offensive expression with expression of their own.

I plan to attend a Eucharistic Holy Hour and Benediction at St. Paul's Church on our campus on Monday evening in order to join others in reaffirming our respect for the Catholic faith at Harvard and to demonstrate that the most powerful response to offensive speech is not censorship, but reasoned discourse and robust dissent.

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