

Chaldean Catholics said key to boycott of Miller

DETROIT – Chaldean Catholic Bishop Ibrahim N. Ibrahim credited the support of Chaldean Catholics in metro Detroit for the success of a boycott of Miller Brewing Co. products that he said resulted in the company pledging to never again support events that insult and offend religious sensibilities.

“We were a big factor in that,” said Bishop Ibrahim, who heads the Southfield, Mich.-based Eparchy of St. Thomas the Apostle, the Chaldean Catholic diocese for the eastern half of the United States.

In metropolitan Detroit, Chaldean Catholics own about 2,000 party stores – about 90 percent of the total of the area’s independent neighborhood convenience stores that sell food and other items, including alcoholic beverages.

Bishop Ibrahim worked with Chaldean ethnic and business groups to boycott Miller products after the company’s logo appeared on a poster for a Sept. 30 San Francisco street fair that mocked Leonardo da Vinci’s painting of “The Last Supper” and had what critics described as a sadomasochistic theme.

The New York-based Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights and other Christian groups expressed outrage, and the league immediately called for a boycott of Miller until the company apologized for its association with the poster and the fair.

On Oct. 31 the Catholic League said it was dropping the boycott and its anti-Miller public relations campaign because the company had extended its Oct. 26 apology over the use of its logo to an acknowledgment of “disrespectful activities” at the fair.

The poster featured men clad in the leather outfits common to the sadomasochistic homosexual subculture. Various sex toys were on the table in front of them. The fair itself featured a man dressed as Christ and a stripper who were lifted up over a Catholic church by a piece of construction machinery men dressed in mock nun garb.

Bishop Ibrahim announced the boycott Oct. 14 at Mother of God Chaldean Cathedral in Southfield. "I told our people, if they are really believers in Jesus Christ, to boycott Miller products," the bishop said.

"Our religion is important for us. I told our people Sunday (Oct. 28), 'Look how it is in Iraq, with all the pressure on them, not one (Chaldean) family has changed their religion. And here we are in the United States, and someone is mocking our religion, and we are going to do nothing?'" Bishop Ibrahim told The Michigan Catholic, newspaper of the Latin-rite Detroit Archdiocese.

"I told them that if they support someone who is supporting such activities, it is just as if they were doing those activities too," he said.

The bishop and leaders of Chaldean ethnic and business groups were meeting the afternoon of Oct. 29 at the Chaldean diocesan center in Southfield, a Detroit suburb, when they received word from Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of Milwaukee, where Miller is based, that he had just received a new letter from Miller that seemed to agree with the terms.

Two days later the league announced it was ending the boycott.

Bishop Ibrahim said he is very pleased with the near total participation of Chaldean business owners with the boycott. "I'm happy we defended our faith and our values," the bishop said.

On Oct. 29, Saad Kassab, proprietor of the King of Woodward party store in Highland Park, about a half-mile north of Detroit's Cathedral of the Most Blessed Sacrament, told The Michigan Catholic he had ordered no Miller products for the store for three weeks.

"They disrespected my religion. It's not right; it wouldn't be right to do it with any religion," said Kassab, a member of St. Thomas Chaldean Parish in West Bloomfield Township.

His wife, Ahlam Kassab, said that when they explain the reasons behind the boycott to customers, "99 percent of our customers are agreeing with it."