

Miller apologizes for its logo on poster parody

SAN FRANCISCO – Milwaukee-based Miller Brewing Co. has issued a formal apology for “the offense caused by the use of Miller brand logos on a poster promoting the Folsom Street Fair in San Francisco with an irreverent take on Leonardo da Vinci’s “The Last Supper.”

In an Oct. 26 statement the company said it completed “an exhaustive audit of its marketing procedures for approving local marketing and sales sponsorships” and will tighten “compliance procedures” to ensure such an incident will not happen again.

The New York-based Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights and other Christian groups expressed outrage over the poster, which had what critics described as a sadomasochistic theme. It carried the Miller trademark as well as those of other sponsors of the Sept. 30 event.

A center figure in the poster is a muscled, shirtless man flanked by men and women in leather fetishistic garb, some in flowing wigs and in poses echoing da Vinci’s mural. The table is strewn with sex toys.

In an Oct. 29 statement, the Catholic League, which has called for a boycott of Miller products, said the apology was inadequate because it is limited to the use of its logo, and was not an apology “for the anti-Catholic nature of the event itself.” The league has said it would drop the boycott if the company “pledges not to sponsor another anti-Catholic event.”

The league said its objections go beyond the poster, repeating its criticism that “sacred symbols were sold as sex toys at the Miller-sponsored event, a stripper and a man dressed as Jesus were hoisted in cages above a Catholic church on a Sunday, and men mocked nuns in the street.”

The fair is one of four annual “fetish events” in San Francisco produced by Folsom Street Events to support local charities serving the gay, lesbian, bisexual and

transgender communities.

In its statement Miller said it “received assurances from its local distributor in San Francisco and from Folsom Street Events that future marketing materials and event activities will fully comply with Miller’s marketing policies and procedures.”

“We do not have a sponsorship contract with Folsom Street Events. The sponsorship is through an independent Miller distributor,” company spokesman Julian Green told Catholic San Francisco, the archdiocesan newspaper, when asked if Miller plans to be a Folsom Street Fair sponsor in the future.

In the future the distributor must “ensure that the future use of our trademarks, as well as our association with activities at Folsom Street Events, is in full compliance with our marketing codes and does not actively disrespect other groups,” he said.

The local distributor, Green said, has supported the Folsom Street Fair for seven years.

“We deeply regret that we did not adhere to our own policies with regard to the Folsom Street Fair,” said Nehl Horton, Miller’s senior vice president, in the company’s statement. “We apologize to everyone we offended as a result. We hope people will forgive us for this serious error and have confidence we will not repeat it.”

“Miller did not have the opportunity to review or approve the Folsom Street Fair poster, but accepts full accountability for this serious mistake,” the release stated.

In its release, Miller Brewing quoted Andy Cooper, Folsom Street Events’ board president, as saying the company “was never afforded the opportunity to review our fair poster before it was printed and distributed. The approval was made by a third party without Miller’s knowledge and consent.”

“I would like to apologize to anyone who felt that the image was disrespectful to their religious beliefs. No malicious intent was involved,” Copper is quoted as saying.

In addition to its public apology, Green said Miller Brewing sent individual letters of

apology to Archbishop George H. Niederauer of San Francisco, Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of Milwaukee and Chaldean Catholic Bishop Ibrahim N. Ibrahim of Detroit. A number of Chaldean-owned businesses have joined in the boycott, according to the Catholic League's Web site.

"Like all major brewers, Miller seeks to market respectfully to a wide and diverse array of consumer groups," Horton said. "But when one group actively disrespects another we cannot support its events and activities."

Archbishop Dolan and his social justice office staff hoped to have "firsthand conversations" with Miller officials so the church officials could both "express our serious concerns" and hear directly from Miller executives rather than base decisions or comments "on what other people might be presenting or saying," said Kathleen Hohl, Milwaukee archdiocesan director of communications.