

Pastor: Reaction to San Francisco incident overblown

SAN FRANCISCO – Reaction to San Francisco Archbishop George H. Niederauer giving Communion to two men in mock nuns' garb during an Oct. 7 Mass has been overblown, said the pastor of the church where the Mass was celebrated.

"It is most unfortunate this incident has clouded the fact the archbishop came to meet with his people and celebrate a beautiful and reverent Mass together – and that is what really happened," said Father Stephen Meriwether, pastor of Most Holy Redeemer Parish.

"This incident has been blown way out of proportion," he told Catholic San Francisco, the archdiocesan newspaper.

Reaction has run the gamut from some who insist the "sisters" had set out to embarrass the church and the archbishop to others who felt the unannounced visitors who videotaped the Mass were more of an intrusion than the costumed men.

In a column written for the Oct. 19 issue of the archdiocesan newspaper but made public Oct. 11, Archbishop Niederauer apologized for giving Communion to "two strangely dressed persons," but said he did not realize they were members of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a group that has "long made a practice of mocking the Catholic Church."

He said he had never met members of the group that describes itself as "a leading-edge order of queer nuns" and "did not recognize who these people were when they approached me."

"I did not recognize either of them as wearing mock religious garb," he added.

Among those in the media who reacted to the situation was Fox News Channel's Bill O'Reilly, who said on his Oct. 14 broadcast that the men were "gay militants in bizarre dress" whose intent was to mock the Mass and Archbishop Niederauer.

Editor Phil Lawler of Catholic World News, an Internet news site, aimed his criticism at the archbishop.

"They were not celebrants but demonstrators, and the archbishop should have known better when he visited Most Holy Redeemer," he wrote.

"Their attendance was intended to shock regular Massgoers and call attention to themselves," wrote Deacon Keith A. Fournier, editor-in-chief for Catholic Online, another Internet news portal.

"They intentionally came forward and placed themselves in the Communion line in order to receive the most holy Eucharist, the sacrament of the body and blood of Jesus Christ," he wrote.

"When a Catholic receives this sacrament, he or she attests to being in the full Communion of the Catholic Church," Deacon Fournier added.

In an interview, retired Father John Malloy, former pastor at SS. Peter and Paul Parish in San Francisco, asked what the church is going to do about allowing members of the group to take part in Communion.

"You can't keep people out of church but you can keep people away from the Eucharist and you can advise them and talk to them," he said.

The two members of the group who received Communion from the archbishop did not respond to e-mail requests from Catholic San Francisco to be interviewed.

But in a commentary posted on the group's Web site, "Sister Edith Myflesh," described as the "current abbess of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, said: "We are dismayed that a moment of genuine Communion during sacred worship is being twisted for political gain by the forces of hatred and dissension."

"The service was an opportunity to welcome the new archbishop of San Francisco," the commentary said. "While at Mass the sisters joined other parishioners in respectful and sincere worship."

Father Meriwether told Catholic San Francisco that parishioners have told him it did not appear the two "sisters" "were trying to grandstand at all." Parishioners were,

however, “upset by the people roaming around filming and taking pictures,” he said.

Members of the Most Holy Redeemer community stressed that the Oct. 7 Mass was prayerful and that the two “sisters” were respectful. People who were there said the “sisters” knelt in a back pew after receiving Communion.

To David Differding, co-chair of the parish liturgy council and master of ceremonies at the Oct. 7 liturgy, the critics “can’t get over the fact that God created gay people. That’s my impression. They want to put up every roadblock they can.”

Jesuit Father Donal Godfrey, one of the Mass concelebrants, said the way the two men were dressed was “disrespectful to religious sisters,” but he said he felt “it probably wasn’t their intention (to offend.) They knelt in all the right places. They stood in all the right places. Except for the way they were dressed, they weren’t doing anything disrespectful.”

“I thought it was disrespectful for somebody to go to another church with the intention of filming it,” he added, “without asking the pastor permission to do that and, second, with the intention of using that in a hostile way, without having a conversation first with the pastor. On the face of it, they were out to get the archbishop.”

Asked about reaction he had received, Archbishop Niederauer expressed concern about the impact of Web logs, or blogs.

“The blogosphere is a kind of dangerous, endless recess in a global schoolyard,” he said, “where the bullies with the biggest bullhorns can shout whatever they want.”