

# WORLD & NATION

## 'Yo Mama's Last Supper' stirs up art controversy

By Tracy Early  
Catholic News Service

BROOKLYN, N.Y. — Bishop Thomas V. Daily of Brooklyn said in a statement Feb. 15 that he was "disturbed by another display of insensitivity toward religion at the Brooklyn Museum of Art."

The statement referred to an exhibition, "Committed to the Image; Contemporary Black Photographers," opening Feb. 16 and on view through April 29.

Controversy arose over a 15-foot, five-panel photographic work by Renee Cox titled "Yo Mama's Last Supper." It includes a picture of herself nude taking the place of Jesus in a depiction of the Last Supper. The Apostles she pictures are 12 clothed black men.

Cox's work is one of 188 by 94 black Americans. News reports said her panel had previously been shown at an Italian church, *Oratorio di San Ludovico* in Venice, as well as the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, Conn., and other places.

"The religious photos in the current exhibit, insulting to people of all races, arrived just as Christians are approaching the penitential season of Lent, which prepares us for the Lord's Last Supper and his death on the cross" Bishop Daily said.

New York City Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, a Catholic from Brooklyn, called "Yo Mama's Last Supper" disgusting, outrageous and anti-Catholic.

He said he would establish a commission to set "decency standards" for museums that receive city funds.

The city owns the building used by the Brooklyn Museum of Art, and in 1999 Giuliani sought to evict it and cut off city

funding for it after it presented "Sensation," an exhibition of works by modern British artists.

That exhibition included a painting by Chris Ofili, identified as a Catholic born in Nigeria and working in England, which was titled "The Holy Virgin Mary" and showed a woman with elephant dung forming one breast and pornographic cutouts surrounding her.

A federal judge ruled that Giuliani violated the First Amendment in seeking to punish the museum. But in a news conference Feb. 15, the mayor said that he might file another suit and base it on a 1998 Supreme Court decision that allowed Congress to set decency standards for grants to be awarded through the National Endowment for the Arts.

Arnold L. Lehman, director of the Brooklyn Museum, acknowledged that some of the works in the photography exhibit might be "controversial and difficult for us as viewers," but said that "throughout history the artist's responsibility has been to make us think."

Giuliani said of those exhibiting the controversial works, "They do it on purpose; they do it to get more attention."

"The problem with it is, if you allow people to continue to do it and not react to it, then it's just going to get worse and worse and worse," he added.

Ofili's painting was criticized by the late New York Cardinal John J. O'Connor in a homily, and Bishop Daily issued a statement expressing support for a boycott of the exhibition and for cutting off public funds going to the museum.

"I had fervently hoped," Bishop Daily said in his statement about the current photography exhibit, "that the experience gained from the crass 'Sensation' episode would have put the museum's foray into religious disrespect behind it."

He asked, "Why is the Brooklyn Museum of Art showing no regard for the religious sensibilities of the community? Why another vulgar display of anti-Christian sentiment? Is publicity more important than respect for religious belief?"

The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, based in Manhattan, released the text of a letter its president, William A. Donohue, sent Feb. 15 to the curator of the photography exhibit, Barbara Millstein.

"To vulgarize Christ in this manner is unconscionable," he wrote of the Cox portrayal of the Last Supper. "That it was chosen for inclusion in this exhibit is morally indefensible."

Donohue also wrote that "Renee Cox is no stranger to Catholic bashing," saying she had previously produced a number of works that "used Catholic imagery



Edgar Romero/CNS

## Thousands homeless



Reuters/CNS

(Above) A statue of Our Lady of the Rosary rests among the ruins of a Catholic church in San Cayetano Istepeque in El Salvador Feb. 18. After two devastating earthquakes in a month's time, the Salvadoran bishops asked the population to overcome political divisions and unite behind a reconstruction plan. (Left) Earthquake survivors receive a meal from aid workers in San Miguel Tepezonte, El Salvador, Feb. 14. Thousands of people have been left homeless in the country.

in ways that are patently offensive."

Cox, identified in press reports as a 43-year-old native of Jamaica who attended a private Catholic school in the New York City borough of Queens, part of the Diocese of Brooklyn, has been quoted as saying she "grew up Catholic."

"Being a Catholic — they are about business, money" she was quoted as saying by *The New York Times* Feb. 16. "I

don't believe in all the philosophy and how it's set up. Catholics had no interest in the abolition of slavery."

In a Feb. 17 letter to Lehman, Michael J. Cummings, spokesman for the Ancient Order of Hibernians, said that by including the Cox work the Brooklyn Museum of Art "has once again failed in its mission to promote and uplift the human spirit."

## Pope, Mubarak discuss conflict

By John Thavis  
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Pope John Paul II discussed the Middle East crisis in a private meeting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, urging an immediate end to violence and a reopening of dialogue.

The pope, who recently voiced alarm at the worsening Israeli-Palestinian conflict, spoke with Mubarak for 25 minutes Feb. 20.

Afterward, Vatican spokesman Joaquin

Navarro-Valls said the two leaders had agreed on the need to "establish a climate of calm and dialogue" as a necessary step toward restoring mutual trust between Israelis and Palestinians.

Navarro-Valls said the Vatican believes it is necessary to "put an immediate end to every form of violence in the region, so that all possible attention and effort can be directed toward reaching a true and just peace."

Such a peace settlement "can only be realized in the respect of international laws by all sides, and in the conviction that all peoples have the same rights and responsibilities," he said.

After their private meeting, the pope greeted Mubarak's wife and his 16-person entourage in the papal library and accepted a gift from the Egyptian delegation — a large papyrus reproduction of Queen Nefertiti, who ruled Egypt in the 14th century B.C.

The pope made few comments while posing for photos, but as he said goodbye to Mubarak, he thanked him for hosting his "fascinating visit" last year to Cairo and Mount Sinai.



### CALENDAR OF SUMMER RETREATS

2001

#### GUIDED RETREATS

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June 16-22

Rev. Michael Crosby, OFM, cap.

SPIRITUALITY FOR THE 21st CENTURY  
June 24-30

Rev. Joseph McKay

JOURNEYING WITH JESUS  
July 8-15

Mary Schneiders, OP

HEART & SOUL OF THE COSMOS  
July 16-22

Rev. Norman Comtois, OMI

Dorothy Landry, MEd, C.A.G.S.

SEEING AS GOD SEES:  
YESTERDAY'S CONTEMPLATIVE WOMEN  
SHOW THE WAY  
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The Berakah Staff

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Maureen Kelly, OSF

July 16-23

Maureen Kelly, OSF

Pauline Plante, CSC

July 27-August 3

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