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Boston archdiocese lauds decision to cancel black mass

By **Jacqueline Tempera** and **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS MAY 13, 2014

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The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston said through a spokesman Tuesday that it is grateful a student group that was slated to hold a reenactment of a satanic black mass at Harvard decided to cancel the campus event.

Plans to stage a black mass Monday were greeted with a fusillade of criticism from the Catholic Church and Harvard administrators, students, and faculty. In response to the planned event, the archdiocese held a Eucharistic procession and holy hour Monday in Cambridge.

“We continue to reject anything that is an attack on the Eucharist,” Terrence Donilon, a spokesman for the archdiocese, said Tuesday. A black mass is widely believed to mock Catholicism.

The Harvard Extension Cultural Studies Club was scheduled to hold the satanic ritual in the Queen’s Head Pub in Memorial Hall on Harvard’s campus, but because of a lack of space and the surrounding controversy, organizers canceled the event.

An unidentified spokesperson for the Cultural Studies Club said the group was forced to postpone a full-scale version of the event until the fall.

The spokesperson chose to communicate solely by e-mail, using an address the university offered reporters seeking a comment.

“At least 700 people wanted to attend that we were aware of, but we are certain the numbers were dramatically higher since people were just planning on showing up and did not know they had to register,” the spokesperson said.

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“Due to this level of interest, and the conflicts this was creating on campus with concerns over upcoming finals, we decided to move the event.”

The Queen’s Head Pub has a capacity of 100 guests, according to the spokesperson.

Donilon praised Harvard’s president, Drew Faust, who decried plans for the black mass. The spokesman for the archdiocese said he was pleased Faust showed “a strong sense of leadership” and appreciative that she attended the holy hour.

“That’s the sign of a community coming together,” Donilon said. “We responded the way Catholics respond — peacefully, respectfully, and through prayer.”

The student club maintains that the black mass was meant to be educational, not offensive. The spokesperson said the club was disappointed at the community’s response to what organizers believed was an act of free speech.

“They come across as being frighteningly oppressive,” the spokesperson said. “There was far too much support for this event to accept the ridiculous picture those who sought to snuff out the voices of the satanic community tried to paint.”

Donilon described as “ridiculous” the suggestion that the black mass was meant to be educational.

“This doesn’t have anything to do with student education or enlightenment,” Donilon said. “I understand we live in a free society. But we believe it is best when we work for the common good, and I don’t see any good that came out it.”

A Harvard spokesman declined to comment Tuesday.

The spokesman’s telephone mailbox was full, and e-mails sent to him generated an automatic response that referred reporters to a statement about the black mass issued Monday night by Robert Neugeboren, dean of students and alumni affairs at Harvard Extension School.



MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

Diana Sanez of Framingham knelt to pray as the Eucharist passed near the MIT Chapel Monday in response to the black mass controversy. A student club said it decided on its own to call off the event.

Neugeboren said the school is “grateful the student group has recognized the strong concerns expressed by members of the Harvard community and beyond.”

Alan Dershowitz, an internationally known scholar and high-profile defense and civil liberties lawyer who retired from Harvard Law School in December, said he has been following the black mass controversy.

Dershowitz had a 50-year run on Harvard’s faculty and continues to provide consultation on legal cases from his office in New York.

While Harvard administrators, the archdiocese, and others called for the black mass to be canceled, no coercive pressure appears to have been used, Dershowitz said. The student club said it decided on its own to relocate and eventually call off the event.

“I’m glad it was canceled, and I’m glad Harvard didn’t ban it outright,” Dershowitz said. “The free speech of the marketplace prevailed.”

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