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Pastor attacks 'art' as 'anti-Christian'

By David Braaten
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

An exhibit of a photograph of a crucified Christ put in a bottle and submerged in the artist's urine, set off a political controversy yesterday when it was discovered that it was in part supported by a federal grant.

The Mississippi pastor who led the fight against the movie, "The Last Temptation of Christ," is leading the protest.

Denouncing the work as "anti-Christian bigotry," the Rev. Donald E. Wildmon demanded the firing of whoever at the National Endowment for the Arts was responsible.

"Religious bigotry should not be supported by tax dollars," Mr. Wildmon said yesterday in a telephone interview from his Tupelo-based American Family Association.

Mr. Wildmon, a United Methodist minister, asked if he wasn't afraid his objections would stir up publicity for the artist and his work, said: "That's always a calculated risk. But the alternative is to stick your head in the sand."

He said the difference between "The Last Temptation" — which he said lost more than \$10 million — and the photograph is that federal taxes supported the \$15,000 prize awarded to Mr. Serrano and the three-city tour of the subsequent exhibit.

"Here's the whole thing," said Mr. Wildmon. "If there's companies out there that want to support this kind of bigotry, we don't have to buy their products. But when it's federal tax dollars, that's a different matter."

The 5-by-3½-foot work is titled "Piss Christ" and the artist, Andres Serrano, acknowledged yesterday that he anticipated objection to the

work, primarily because of its provocative title.

"I feel when people attack a work of art to such a great extent, they imbue it with a far greater power than when they ignore it and, in that, I'm flattered that they think it deserves such attention," the 38-year-old artist said.

Pinning down individual responsibility beyond the artist's was made difficult by the bureaucracy of the Awards in the Visual Arts program that paid for the prize and the exhibit.

The program, now in its eighth year, is funded by the arts endowment, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Equitable Foundation, which is part of the Equitable Life Assurance Society.

But the actual money goes as a grant to the Southeast Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, N.C. The center selected five jurors to pick 10 regional winners of \$15,000 awards, based on color slides they submitted of their best works.

The winning artists then chose what they wanted to go in the exhibit — not necessarily ones they had submitted to the jury.

In fact, three of the five jurors could not remember if they had seen "Piss Christ" among Mr. Serrano's submissions.

"We saw hundreds of slides," said juror Ned Rifkin, chief curator of painting and sculpture at the Hirshhorn Museum. "I can't be sure, but I don't think we saw it. We could have seen it without the title."

Juror Howard Fox of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Howardena Pindell, a New York artist, were likewise unsure.

Mr. Serrano did not say whether

he had included a slide of the photograph in his submission to the jury. He said he made four prints, and has already sold one for \$3,600.

In addition to his demand that the arts endowment fire whoever was responsible, Mr. Wildmon demanded apologies from the two foundations. He suggested individuals cancel their Equitable insurance policies if no apology was made.

The Equitable Foundation issued a statement yesterday regretting "any distress" caused by the episode, and pointing out that it had not been involved in the selection process for the exhibit or the prize. "Equitable did not and would not knowingly lend its name and its support to such a piece of work," the statement said.

The arts endowment also issued a statement, noting that it is forbidden by law from interfering in the "artistic choices made by its grantees." It added: "We at the endowment do, nonetheless, deeply regret any offense to any individual."

Rockefeller Foundation president Peter Goldmark said: "I respect the right of any individual to object to a work of art, and the parallel right of artists to express themselves and of exhibitors to show works they deem interesting and meritorious artistically."

In New York, Stefan Stux, owner of the Soho gallery that normally exhibits Mr. Serrano's work, described the artist as a Christian who doesn't always express his religious beliefs "exactly the way every other guy does."

The most eloquent defense of the Serrano work was made last month in Richmond, where objections surfaced in the press nearly two months after the exhibit had closed at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

The photograph "cruelly juxtaposes the sacred and the profane to shock the viewer into a reconsideration of the image and its true meaning," said museum director Paul Perrot.