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News Analysis

Catholics Boycott eBay Over Hocked Host

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 by **ANDREW WALTHER**
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SIOUX CITY, Iowa — For years, the public auction website eBay has quietly allowed the sale of items — such as relics — whose sale is forbidden by the Catholic Church. But when the site allowed the posting April 9 of what was purported to be a host consecrated by Pope John Paul II in 1998, Catholics nationwide were outraged.

The episode ended happily, but several issues were left unresolved.

"eBay is more interested in profits than in the beliefs of Catholics," said Tom Serafin, founder of the International Crusade for Holy Relics, whose organization has been trying for the past seven years to get eBay to stop allowing the sale of relics and other items which Church law prohibits being sold.

Serafin said he alerted dozens of his organization's supporters to the sacrilegious sale of the Eucharist.

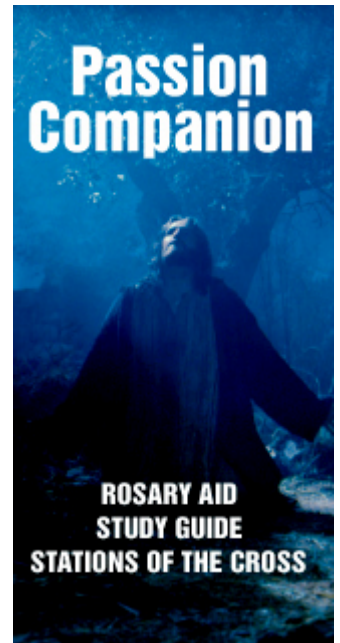
The auction was allowed to go forward despite its critics because the listing did not violate any federal, state, or local laws, and was not deemed hateful, said Hani Durzy, a spokeswoman for the San Jose, Calif.-based company.

A Catholic man, Bill Osbourne, of Cupertino, Calif., reportedly agreed to purchase the host for \$2,000.

He said that reports of consecrated hosts being desecrated in satanic rituals motivated him. "That's Jesus in the host," he told Spiritdaily.com, "Any minute I waited, it could have fallen into the hands of a witch or a Satanist."

According to Canon 935 of the Code of Canon Law, "It is not lawful for anyone to keep the blessed Eucharist in personal custody or to carry it around, unless there is an urgent pastoral need and the prescriptions of the diocesan bishop are observed."

"This sale is worrying, especially now," said Kiera McCaffrey, spokeswoman for the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights in New York. "This could be the beginning of a trend, though we certainly hope it is not."



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The listing began with a disclaimer from the seller, who is not identified by name, that stated, "I am not Catholic and do not believe I'm going to hell for selling this collectible."

A spokesman for Osbourne's parish in Santa Clara, Calif., said that Osbourne had attempted to buy the item "in good faith," and had consulted the parish priest on the matter.

The Diocese of Sioux City — where the seller is located — was vocal in its opposition to such sales.

"The holy Eucharist is central to our faith," said Msgr. Roger Augustine, diocesan administrator of Sioux City, in a statement. "Our Catholic doctrine teaches us that the Eucharist is the true presence of Jesus Christ and is to be consumed and not put on display as you would a souvenir."

By the end of the day April 15, the Diocese of Sioux City issued a statement saying the seller had withdrawn the sale. According to Msgr. Augustine, the statement said, "The seller deeply regretted the effort to sell the Eucharist and extended a personal apology to him, the diocese and any others who had been offended."

There was no money exchanged, and the host was "properly disposed of according to the dictates of Catholic Church law." James Wharton, director of communications for the diocese, clarified that officials dissolved the host in water and buried the water.

Year of the Eucharist

In the midst of the Year of the Eucharist, the sale makes clear just how careful Catholics must be to prevent the Eucharist from falling into the wrong hands, said Peter Sonski.

He's the communications director at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., where ushers watch to make sure the Eucharist is consumed to prevent abuses.

"We have ushers stationed 6 to 8 feet from the priest or minister, watching to make sure the Eucharist is consumed," Sonski said. "If a person refuses to consume the Eucharist, we do not let them proceed," he said.

Sonski said that some have criticized the policy in the past, but with the sale on eBay, he said the Shrine's policy has been vindicated.

The eBay seller claimed to have attended a Mass Pope John Paul celebrated to mark the 20th anniversary of his papacy. Though not a Catholic, this person went to receive Communion, consumed the Host but got in line again and received a second Host that he or she saved, along with other souvenirs. The person put all those papal souvenirs on sale with the Host.

Sonski said his home parish has a policy similar to that of the Shrine.

"We are trying to prevent this sort of thing from happening, Sonski said.

eBay Policy

eBay does restrict what it will sell. It will not allow the sale of Nazi-sympathetic items or the book *Why Is America so Fat* because such items are hateful. It won't allow the sale of items from National Parks because they belong to no one person.

Nonetheless, said Serafin, the site routinely allows the sale of items such as Catholic relics.

"There are many problems with eBay," said Serafin, "for one thing, sometimes items are sold as relics that we have proven are fake."

Another problem, he said, is that when Catholics rush to rescue a treasure listed on eBay to prevent it from falling into the wrong hands, they often bid against each other raising the price higher and higher.

And while parishes and shrines work to prevent the abuses at their end, Serafin says Catholics need to take a stand against the sacrilegious sale of sacraments and sacramentals.

"I am calling for a nationwide boycott of eBay until they cease allowing sales that are offensive to Catholics," Serafin said. "We are the silent majority, but now we need to be heard."

Andrew Walther writes from New Haven, Connecticut.

