Opinion
Editorial

by NCR Editorial Staff

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Right there it is. On the events section of the Diocese of Syracuse, New York, Facebook page. With a photo even. "From Ashes to Glory: A Lenten Reflection," the diocesan announcement reads. "We are pleased to welcome internationally famous liturgical musician, Dan Schutte, who will help us to reflect on Christ's journey and remind us that it is Christ's redeeming love that raises us up from the dust and ashes of death into glory."

Schutte, one of the St. Louis Jesuits, the 1970s musical group that is responsible for some of the most widely used Catholic hymns over the last four decades, led a Lenten retreat at Our Lady of Sorrows Parish in Vestal, New York, March 19-20.

The parish posted this message to its Facebook page March 22: "Many thanks to Dan Schutte … We pray that everyone who attended was touched by the moving message Dan presented and that the remainder of your Lenten journey is a time for you to reflect upon and deepen your relationship with Jesus."

Schutte was not so warmly welcomed in the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, where he was scheduled to do a concert April 28 at Visitation Parish as a benefit for the local chapters of the National Association of Pastoral Musicians. Those plans were scuttled after Bishop James Johnston of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Missouri, ordered the concert moved out of the parish, ostensibly because Johnston had not received "a letter of suitability" from Schutte's home diocese.

Schutte has had "letters of suitability" from his past archbishops, but since 2012, his letters have come from the chancellor of the University of San Francisco, the Jesuit institution where he is composer-in-residence, because his current local ordinary, Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone, has instructed lay Catholics to get such letters not from him but from the Catholic leader (pastor, rector or chancellor) who knows them best. The letter submitted to the Kansas City organizers explains this.

So Schutte was barred from a Catholic parish on a technicality. The concert will go to an alternative site. But there is more to this story that must be addressed.

In late February and early March as Kansas City organizers began promoting the event, Church Militant, a Michigan-based organization that has a very narrow agenda and an oversized social media presence, got wind of it and posted misleading and questionable assertions about Schutte and the event. The website blazed in its headline that Schutte is "an ex-Jesuit" and wrote that Schutte is "widely believed to be an active homosexual." It called one of Schutte's best-know hymns, "Here I Am Lord," a "gay anthem."

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Without naming sources, Church Militant claimed that "locals wrote to the diocese expressing concern, and Catholics responded strongly." The website claimed "Catholics" were "pushing back" against the performance. Two days after its first report, the website reported that the pressure it helped stir up had convinced the diocese to move the concert out of Visitation Parish.

The local diocesan spokesman disputed Church Militant's claims, telling NCR that Johnston had made his decision days before Church Militant began writing about the concert and that the diocese "received a few [complaints], but not a barrage as was reported."

Schutte's departure from the Jesuits in 1986 is public record. We must note also that he has been a member of NCR's board of directors since June 2017. Schutte steadfastly refuses to discuss details of his private life in public or with the press. We will honor that request.

Writing to the clergy in his diocese, Johnston said, "Speculation by Church Militant and by others on social media as to why the event was cancelled … has caused

controversy among the faithful on social media and elsewhere."

"The speculation about Mr. Schutte and about the diocese's reasons for cancelling this event has been uninformed and too often uncharitable both to Mr. Schutte and Visitation Parish," he wrote.

Johnston's response is disappointing and disheartening.

By using a questionable technicality to bar Schutte from singing in Visitation Parish, Johnston planted in the minds of many the belief that he bowed to the pressure of Church Militant-inspired activism and that is deeply regrettable.

Church Militant is one of those all-too-common entities that poses as a news organization but is really in the business of fake news. Journalism aspires to enlighten and inform. Church Militant aims to obscure and tear down. The purpose of Church Militant — and other fake news sites and certain Catholic bloggers — is to hurt people and organizations.

Johnston could have ended its influence in his diocese any number of ways. He could have simply done nothing, demonstrated a trust in the local pastor's decision and let the concert proceed. He could have — like scores of other bishops and religious authorities across the country — accepted the letter of suitability that Schutte submitted.

Johnston's third option, and the one we would recommend, would have been to welcome Schutte and his music ministry to the diocese and denounce the fake news (some have called it the sin of calumny) spread by Church Militant and its ilk.

Last fall when Church Militant, LifeSiteNews and Fr. John Zuhlsdorf ("Fr. Z") kicked up a social media campaign against Jesuit Fr. James Martin because of his book *Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter Into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity*, Martin received ringing endorsements from a number of bishops. Cardinal Blase Cupich invited Martin to lead Lenten reflections in the Chicago cathedral, which Martin is doing March 22 and 23.

We need more actions like Cupich's. We need bishops standing up against the calumny spread by these self-appointed watchdogs.

Johnston had an opportunity to stand with a man who has dedicated his life to ministry in the church against forces aiming to harm the church. Regrettably, Johnston let the opportunity pass.

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