News



Transgender activist Cecilia Gentili poses for a photo at the offices of the Oxford University Press in New York on April 24, 2014. The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York condemned the funeral of Gentili, which was held in St. Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan and drew a large audience on Feb. 15, 2024. (AP/Bebeto Matthews, File)

Brian P. D. Hannon

View Author Profile

Associated Press

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

February 19, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The funeral of a renowned transgender activist in a New York cathedral elicited a denunciation of the event by a senior church official, who called the Mass a scandal within one of the preeminent houses of worship in U.S. Catholicism.

The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York condemned the funeral of Cecilia Gentili, which was held in St. Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan and drew a large audience on Feb. 15.

Gentili was known as a leading advocate for other transgender people, as well as sex workers and people with HIV. A post on her Instagram account announced her death on Feb. 6 at age 52.

In a written statement released Feb. 17, the Rev. Enrique Salvo, pastor of St. Patrick's, thanked those who "share our outrage over the scandalous behavior" at the funeral.

"The Cathedral only knew that family and friends were requesting a funeral Mass for a Catholic, and had no idea our welcome and prayer would be degraded in such a sacrilegious and deceptive way," Salvo said in the statement.

Advertisement

Videos of Gentili's funeral show an estimated audience of more than 1,000 celebrants, including transgender people and other friends and supporters chanting her name, applauding, singing and offering praise of her stature as a leading light of the city's LGBTQ+ community.

During one eulogy that was widely circulated on social media, Gentili was celebrated as "Saint Cecilia, the mother of all whores."

Salvo called the behavior at the Mass a "scandal" and a "potent reminder of how much we need the prayer, reparation, repentance, grace, and mercy to which this holy season (of Lent) invites us."

In a statement, Gentili's family denied that the church had been deceived and said the gathering "brought precious life and radical joy to the Cathedral in historic defiance of the Church's hypocrisy and anti-trans hatred."

"The only deception present at St. Patrick's Cathedral is that it claims to be a welcoming place for all," the family said.

A former sex worker who suffered addiction and was jailed at Rikers Island, Gentili became a transgender health program coordinator, a nonprofit policy director for an established gay men's health organization, GMHC, and a lobbyist for health equality and anti-discrimination legislation, among other advocacy work.

Gentili founded the COIN Clinic, short for Cecilia's Occupational Inclusion Network, a free health program for sex workers through the Callen-Lorde community health organization in New York.

"New York's LGBTQ+ community has lost a champion in trans icon Cecilia Gentili," New York Gov. Kathy Hochul posted on X, formerly Twitter, following Gentili's death.

Gentili acted in the FX television series "Pose," about the underground ballroom dance scene in the 1980s and 1990s. She also performed two one-woman stage shows.

"I am an atheist, but I am always asking God for things," Gentili said in "Red Ink," her autobiographical show touching on topics including her childhood in Argentina and lack of religious faith.

St. Patrick's Cathedral, a Manhattan architectural and tourist landmark, has been the site of funerals for numerous prominent New Yorkers including Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, Babe Ruth and emergency responders who died in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack.

Conservative group CatholicVote condemned fellow "Pose" actor Billy Porter, whose singing performance during the funeral was characterized by the group as a mockery of the "Our Father" prayer. "This is just unbelievable and sick," CatholicVote said on X.

In a statement before the song, Porter called Gentili a leader among "an entire community of people who transformed my life forever."

"Grief is singular, it's individual. Please know that however you grieve is what's right," Porter said. "There's no right or wrong way to grieve. But just make sure that you do, you allow yourself to do that, so that we can get to the other side of something that feels a little bit like grace."