News



Jesuit artist Nicholas Leeper shows the artworks "The Crucifixion (Kiss It Better with Band-Aid)" and "Madonna del Parto (Once Upon a Time ... In Bethlehem)" during a press walkthrough for his exhibition "Twilight of the Idols" in St. Mary Chapel at St. Francis Xavier Church in New York, May 13, 2026. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)



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When Jesuit artist Nicholas Leeper first contacted the Sheen Center for Thought and Culture about a possible exhibition, he imagined it as a culminating moment before the next stage of his formation.

Over the previous two years, Leeper's paintings — colorful works blending Byzantine iconography with the visual language of pop art and advertising — had appeared in group exhibitions across the United States and abroad, including in Europe, the United Kingdom and Peru. But he had never gathered the work together in a solo exhibition.

"I thought it would be good to do like a show, a solo show, to kind of show all of this work in one place," Leeper told National Catholic Reporter.

The Sheen Center, founded by the New York Archdiocese in 2015 as a venue for dialogue between faith and contemporary culture, seemed like a fitting location. Leeper said he reached out in December after noticing that the gallery calendar for spring appeared open.

After several rounds of discussion, Leeper said, the center agreed to host the exhibition in May.

About two weeks before the opening, however, the exhibition was abruptly canceled. "They emailed me saying they got some phone calls, emails expressing concern about the work," Leeper said. "And then they called me and said it's canceled."



The picture "The Visitation," displayed at the "Twilight of the Idols" exhibition in St. Mary Chapel at St. Francis Xavier Church in New York, reimagines Mary and Elizabeth as figures in a midcentury cigarette advertisement. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

The exhibition, titled "Twilight of the Idols," takes its name from Friedrich Nietzsche's 1889 critique of Christianity and modern morality. Leeper's paintings place familiar forms of commercial advertising inside the structure of Byzantine icons.

In one of the central works, "Madonna and Child (Tomatokos)," Mary appears as a smiling 1950s housewife from a Campbell's soup advertisement, holding a can of tomato soup instead of the infant Jesus. The picture "The Visitation" reimagines Mary and Elizabeth as figures in a midcentury cigarette advertisement, leaning toward one another in conversation and recognition.

"Madonna del Parto (Once Upon a Time ... in Bethlehem)" portrays a pregnant Mary through the image of Sharon Tate, suspended between expectancy and uncertainty. While in "Santa Abraham (The Three Strangers)" Abraham is depicted as a Santa Claus figure from a vintage Coca-Cola advertisement.

The work is intentionally provocative, but Leeper describes the project less as an attack on religious imagery than as an invitation to reconsider it.



"Santa Abraham (The Three Strangers)" and "Judith Beheading Holofernes," artworks displayed at the "Twilight of the Idols" exhibition in St. Mary Chapel at St. Francis Xavier Church in New York, May 2026 (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

"For us Jesuits, it's finding God in all things," he said. "How can we really see God working through all art forms, not just the ones we like?"

Leeper said he was never told who objected to the exhibition or what specific concerns had been raised. Surprisingly, one of Leeper's works remains displayed in the rectory of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York.

The Sheen Center for Thought and Culture did not respond to NCR's request for comments.

Leeper described the cancellation as disappointing and "certainly a shock," particularly given the Sheen Center's role as a cultural institution connected to the New York Archdiocese. Yet the setback proved brief.

Within a day, the exhibition had found another home. At lunch in the Downtown New York Jesuit residence where he lives, Leeper informed Jesuit Fr. Kenneth Boller, pastor of the Church of St. Francis Xavier, about the cancellation.

Advertisement

"We were in the Jesuit dining room, and he said he had just gotten the bad news. And I said, 'How many pictures do you have? How much space does it need?' We looked around the dining room. I said, 'The Mary Chapel will do very well.' That's it," Boller said.

The exhibition ultimately opened May 9 in the Mary Chapel at St. Francis Xavier Church in partnership with Xavier High School, where Leeper teaches art, Scripture and ethics.

"I appreciate his work and the perspective he has on it to present our own Catholic belief that the Holy Family and the various saints were ordinary human beings touched by the divine," Boller said. "And so using the pop art medium to depict it is a way to get you to rethink what you see."

To explain the tradition Leeper's work draws upon, Boller pointed to older forms of sacred art.



"Madonna and Child (Tomotokos)" and "Madonna and Child (Purest Protection)," artworks displayed at the "Twilight of the Idols" exhibition in St. Mary Chapel at St. Francis Xavier Church in New York, May 2026 (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

"There's a wonderful exhibit on Raphael in the Metropolitan Museum of Art now," he said. "Raphael has wonderful pictures of Mary, Jesus, John the Baptist, etc., all through the image of Renaissance art, the style of clothing, the manner in which

they hold themselves, the surroundings are from the perspective of his time and place, beautifully done. But that's not how Mary looked."

He also referenced images of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which depict Mary as an Indigenous woman appearing to Juan Diego in 16th-century Mexico. "The point of it is that Our Lady relates to the Indigenous people as well as everybody else," Boller said.

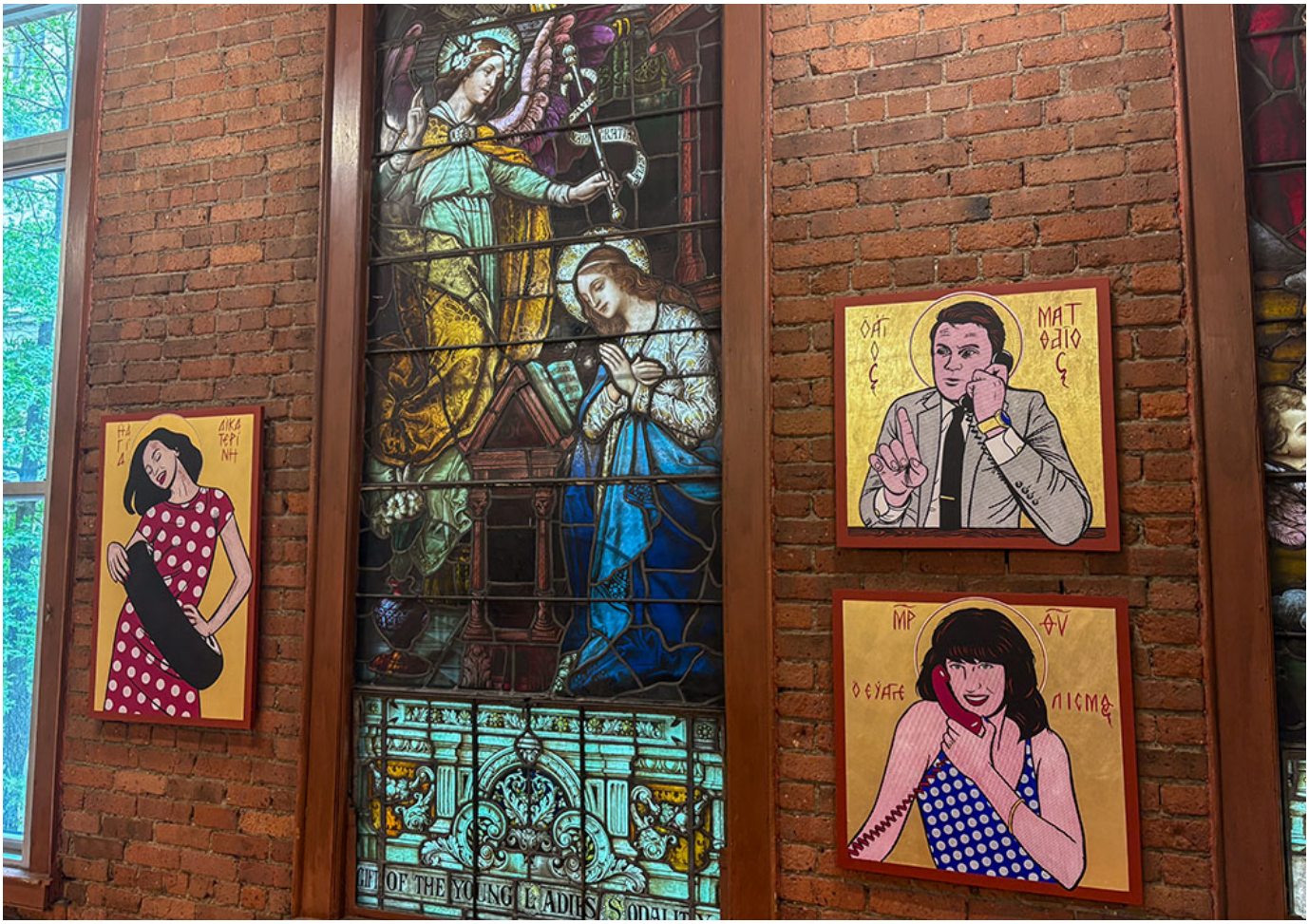
Leeper's work, he argued, operates similarly, but through the imagery of modern consumer culture.

"What Nick does is a different medium, but it's the same idea," Boller said. "He uses the medium of pop art, the '50s and '60s commercialism, to say, 'What would an ordinary person do?' "

Jack Raslowsky, president of Xavier High School, said he was disappointed by the cancellation at the Sheen Center. "I think it's a missed opportunity on the part of Sheen," Raslowsky said to NCR. "I would always hope there's dialogue and conversation before decisions are made, and that was lacking here."

Like Boller, Raslowsky viewed the exhibition as an invitation to reconsider familiar religious images. "How many works of art of the Blessed Mother look the same, right?" he asked. "Reality is not that simple. Life isn't that simple. The Blessed Mother's not that simple. God's not that simple."

The exhibition's move to St. Francis Xavier also placed it within institutions with long Jesuit traditions emphasizing dialogue, intellectual inquiry and engagement with culture. Xavier Church in New York is internationally known for being a welcoming Catholic hub at the forefront of social justice issues, such as the environment, the fight against racism, and LGBTQ+ inclusion, especially during the AIDS epidemic. Leeper connected his project to broader questions about aesthetics, faith and identity within contemporary Catholicism.



At left, "St. Catherine of Alexandria" and, at right, "The Call of Levi (Mad Man)" and "The Annunciation," artworks displayed at the "Twilight of the Idols" exhibition in St. Mary Chapel at St. Francis Xavier Church in New York in May 2026 (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

"Right now, there's this kind of return to this older Catholic aesthetic, which is great and fine," he said. "But I think we can't be so close-fisted about our style preferences, our aesthetic. What we should be close-fisted about is our ethic, that we care about the good, the true, the beautiful, not aesthetically, not just in looks, but in meaning."

For Leeper, the title "Twilight of the Idols" also reflects what he sees as a danger of turning particular artistic styles into absolutes.

"Sometimes we think like Jesus must look like this and that, he must be a white guy, he must be half naked on a cross," he said. "That is an aesthetic, but that's not the only way to depict him."

"When we look at those things and think that's the only way our church should look, or when we go to our parish and we find something we don't like in the liturgy, and we think that's the only way, like, this can't be, 'We need it to look the way I want it to look,' we're kind of becoming idolaters in a certain sense," he added. "We're worshiping the thing rather than God."



Jesuit artist Nicholas Leeper during a press walkthrough for his exhibition "Twilight of the Idols" in St. Mary Chapel at St. Francis Xavier Church in New York, May 13, 2026 (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

Leeper said some viewers initially skeptical of the work became more receptive after discussing it. Among the most enthusiastic responses, he said, came from his students.

For Raslowsky, the educational value of the exhibition lies in its ability to unsettle assumptions.

"I think good art helps us break free of those limits," he said. "And then hopefully helps us enter into relationship with that God who loves us beyond all understanding in new ways."

"There are no limits to that love," he added. "There are no limits to that forgiveness. There are no limits to God's hopes, dreams and desires for us."

The controversy surrounding "Twilight of the Idols" arrives at a moment when Catholic aesthetics have gained renewed visibility among younger generations, especially online, while debates over tradition, liturgy and artistic expression continue within the church.

Leeper said he hopes the exhibition can contribute to those conversations rather than deepen divisions.

"With the polarization and the silos, that's really because we don't talk to each other," he said. "And I feel like art is something to talk about. Art brings us together to have that conversation."