By Ellen Wong

On Sunday, Dec. 10, I took part in a political protest at the Tufts Catholic Church, one that has provoked a great deal of controversy on campus. The following is a description, given from a personal point of view, of exactly what occurred and of some of the particular reasons behind the actions.

A short time before the protest took place, some criticisms were publicly made about the policies of the Catholic Church concerning the church's "perceived negligence on the issues of AIDS, condom use, and violence against gays, lesbians and bisexuals."

Due to the controversy and some of the responses caused by the criticism, some members of the gay, lesbian and bisexual population at Tufts felt that a public protest embodying their anger against the Church's policies was in order. Several of my acquaintances and I decided to organize and participate in a public action protesting the silence and/or negative policies of the Catholic Church regarding AIDS, condom use and gay hate crimes. We also wished to emphasize our right as tuition-paying students to be able to attend any Tufts function without feeling threatened or intimidated.

We decided that the protest should be held as soon as possible, in light of the recent events, and we chose the next available Sunday Mass to hold it. Many of us were unaware that that particular Mass was the annual Christmas Mass, but it should be made clear that the fact that it was the Christmas Mass was irrelevant to our plan. We would have held the protest no matter what service was being held.

The eight of us who participated met at the campus center before the Mass to discuss our plan of action. We unanimously agreed that the spirit of the protest was to be respectful and non-disruptive. Thus, we discussed at length the actions we would take in order to make our point and still follow the spirit of the protest.

We all wore black, to mourn for the gays, lesbians and bisexuals who have died of AIDS, and to protest the violence directed against our community, and the suicide caused, in part, by anguish due to the Church's "perceived negligence on the issues of AIDS, condom use, and violence against gays, lesbians and bisexuals."

In addition, we wrote an open letter to the editors of the Tufts student newspaper, The Tufts Daily, and all wore pink triandes, to identify ourselves as openly gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

At the end of Mass, we left the sanctuary and walked to Goddard Chapel and entered through the door facing the cannon. It was still several minutes before the service was supposed to start, and the chapel was at less than half capacity, so we were able to enter and walk down the middle aisle holding hands and sit in the front pew on the right side facing the altar without blocking anyone. We took off our coats, sat down and remained seated throughout the service. We did not recite any prayers or sing any songs. Since we arrived early and sat down, it was my impression that except for the people who passed by us, or those seated near us, most of the people at the service were unaware of our presence until we left.

The only conflict in our plan came at the time of the greeting of fellowship. Since some of the members of the protest were unaware of the greeting as part of the service, and some of us had forgotten about it, we did not have an organized response to the greeting, and had to decide on an individual basis which action to take.

My own conflict about the situation was to what degree I should participate in the greeting of fellowship, if at all, and still adhere to the message and actions of the protest. Some individuals, such as myself, chose to shake hands or in some way give physical acknowledgement to the greeters and some chose not to respond at all. In each case, it was a personal decision made by each person.

Afterwards, we continued to sit silently through the rest of the service until communion was called, which was the point in the service at which we had all agreed we would leave. We waited for the person in our group at the far right of the pew to get up and lead us out, and the rest of us followed suit. As we began to leave, two women were proceeding down the right side aisle towards the alter. The man leading us chose to wait for them to pass so that our exit would not block them. As a result, we ended up standing for a minute or two, turned around with our backs to the alter. Apparently this is considered by some to be a sacrilegious act. However, it was not our intention to be blasphemous or sacrilegious, and we were unaware at the time that our actions were viewed as such.

When the women had exited the aisle, we joined hands and proceeded to walk down the side aisle, being sure not to get into anyone's way or impede anyone's progress while they were lining up to take communion. The door closest to that aisle was blocked with many people so we crossed over and exited the door we had originally entered from.

From my own personal observations, the service itself was not disrupted or delayed in any manner. It appeared to have started on time and there did not seem to be any discontinuities in the service. No one made any complaints to us.

We were not there in a hostile frame of mind, nor did we intend to hurt anyone. We were there to make a statement and I think we achieved this.

Protest at Catholic Service

PROTEST

There were moments in the service when I felt intimidated and uncomfortable, especially as we were leaving. During that time I heard some offensive comments directed at us, and one protestor reported a perceived physical action against her. It appears that some people were upset at our presence, but we cannot necessarily be held responsible for other people's emotions or reactions.

I think I can speak for all of the protestors in saying that we were justified in our feeling of being harassed. The fact that the Catholic Church's policies are offensive and dangerous to many people, gay, lesbians and bisexuals included, participated in the protest because as a gay person, I feel I have the right to speak out against an institution which is oppressing me and my people. To the best of my knowledge, our protest was legal and respectful. We did not break any school rules that I know of, and we adhered to the rules listed in the Pachyderm carefully.

Coincidentally, the AIDS coalition to unleash power, ACT UP, held a protest in New York on the same date. Our protest was in no way related to the one held by ACT UP, nor were we affiliated with the Tufts Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community. Our protest was held by eight individuals of the Tufts community. It was a separate action, although most of the individuals' personal feelings about the Catholic Church and the protest paralleled the sentiment of those taken up by the ACT UP group. Our actions and intentions however, were totally separate.