

30 YEARS AND COUNTING

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July 1 marked my 30th year as president and CEO of the Catholic League. Bernadette Brady-Egan, our vice president, celebrated her 28th anniversary on the same day. We've had a good run, and we're not done.

One reason for not retiring is the state of our country. Never have I seen our country more polarized or disfigured. There is an angry and mean-spirited segment of our society that loathes the United States, traffics in lies, and espouses a wide range of pernicious ideas and policies. At root, they are motivated by a hatred of our religious heritage, and they are hell bent on shoving their militant secular agenda down our throat. They must be stopped.

When I began in 1993, coming home to New York after 15 years teaching college in Pittsburgh and a year in residence at The Heritage Foundation, I inherited an organizational and financial mess. Fr. Virgil Blum, the founder, died in 1990, and at that point the headquarters moved from Milwaukee to a suburb of Philadelphia.

The leadership at that time was abysmal, and after going through a half dozen presidents, the headquarters relocated to New York City in November 1992; the new home was in the headquarters of the Archdiocese of New York.

How did they find me? After word got out that I was about to start a counter Catholic civil rights organization in Pittsburgh, with the blessings of Bishop Donald Wuerl, I was courted by a New York search firm.

When I came to the interview at La Guardia Airport, the head hunter told me that many people were interested in the job, and that Anna Quindlen had someone in mind. She was a very

liberal columnist for the *New York Times*, and not exactly in line with Catholic teachings on a lot of issues. Without blinking an eye, I said something to the effect that "if you want someone like her, you don't want me." He smiled.

He smiled because I obviously said what he was hoping I would say. He then called the three people who were interested in interviewing me at the new headquarters (they would not have wasted their time if the head hunter had given me the thumbs down). The meeting went well. After I underwent back surgery in Pittsburgh, I made the move to New York.

The first thing that the board of directors asked me to do was to stop the bleeding. The Catholic League had been so badly managed that it was losing \$10,000-\$20,000 a month, with not much in reserve. The board asked me to go around the country, meeting with the heads of the chapters, assessing the situation.

I traveled to Minneapolis, Boston, Washington, Milwaukee, Chicago and Pasadena. When I was asked by the head of the Pasadena chapter—who was not a Catholic—what my five-year plan was, I told him I wasn't sure we would be around for even half that time.

Then he told me that he had scheduled to fly me to Las Vegas the next day. I was slated to talk about the Catholic League to a large group of Notre Dame guys after they spent hours drinking beer and watching a football game (this was an annual event, I was told). To top things off, all of this was to be done on the Catholic League's dime. As you might expect, I never boarded the plane.

With few exceptions, what I uncovered was gross incompetence. The board of directors was also to blame: they allowed some chapters to be full-time positions; some were part-time; some were paid; others were volunteers.

I had warned all of the chapter leaders that tough decisions

were likely to be made. By the end of the year, all but two chapters were closed (and those two didn't last long).

When I started half way through 1993, a board member told me the Catholic League was expected to run a deficit of \$150,000 by the end of the year. In six months, I cut it in half. The next year we posted a profit, and we have been on good grounds ever since.

Before I left Pittsburgh, a priest friend asked how I was going to jump start the organization. I know how to work the media, I said, and that will generate free publicity, resulting in new members. It worked.

I was already a regular on CNN's "Larry King Live" and "Crossfire," as well as NBC's "Phil Donahue" show. So I just picked up where I left off. In 1996, Fox News was launched, and immediately I became a regular on Bill O'Reilly's show and "Hannity and Colmes." Then I became a regular on MSNBC, especially with shows hosted by Chris Matthews and Joe Scarborough. It was these opportunities, along with other media exposure, that were responsible for giving the Catholic League the platform to grow.

I had a physical in May and everything is good. I am writing as fast as ever, and my passion for righting wrongs is still strong. There is much work to be done.