

# **“60 Minutes” Rigs Show Against Catholic Church**

On January 22, the CBS program “60 Minutes” aired a segment on the Catholic dissident group Call to Action. The segment covered a Call to Action conference held in Chicago in November, 1994, treating viewers to comments from the most alienated portions of the Catholic community. In the wake of the show, the headquarters of the Catholic League was deluged with phone calls and letters, all of which asked for League action. When it became apparent that the show was doctored to produce a certain result, the League made a formal organizational response.

At the time of the shooting of the Call to Action conference, “60 Minutes” executive producer Barry Lando was quoted as saying that the segment would provide a look “at the state of the Catholic Church in the U.S. today.” However, the show did nothing of the kind, focusing instead on a very small and unrepresentative portion of the Catholic community. Nowhere in the program was Call for Action depicted as the radical fringe, rather the members were politely, and incorrectly, called “cafeteria Catholics.”

In the beginning of the show, reporter Mike Wallace asserted that “a growing number [of Catholics] have begun to question some of his [the pope’s] teachings,” suggesting that while Call to Action may not be the authentic voice of the Church, it was not a band of aging malcontents either. Yet because 50 percent of the members are over the age of 50, and most are women, the composition of Call to Action hardly mirrors the demographics of the Catholic population. And their extremist positions hardly square with the sentiments of the rank and file, yet none of this merited much attention from Mr. Wallace, a reporter widely acclaimed for his tough style. Indeed, he let the most inane comments go wholly uncontested.

It is significant that the program did not show any element in the Church that could plausibly be branded mainstream. Instead, it featured such bizarre groups as Rent A Priest, outfits that are as unknown to Catholics as non-Catholics. It also showed a few nuns protesting Church teachings in St. Peter's Square. Most telling, however, was the segment where a group of women, some of whom were nuns, were shown saying Mass and distributing Holy Communion.

The show constantly tried to cast the Pope as a stubborn Neanderthal fighting against the forces of enlightenment. Time after time the program referred to *his* teachings (meaning the Holy Father's), and not the *Church's* teachings, the effect of which was to personalize, and therefore delegitimize, the pope's authority. Another effect was to encourage the viewer to believe that one man stands in the way of much desired change, and that the change agents have been victimized by the Vatican.

The lack of balance in the show was intentional. "60 Minutes" had access to a more informed and representative voice, and still decided not to air it. In point of fact, it had on tape an interview with two lay authorities on the Catholic Church (both of whom are members of the Catholic League's board of advisors), interviews that had been commissioned by "60 Minutes" for the express purpose of responding to the Call to Action segment. Harvard Law Professor Mary Ann Glendon and Ethics and Public Policy Center President George Weigel taped an interview with Mike Wallace in New York on December 4, 1994, but within a few days of the taping, Wallace called to tell them that their interview had been dropped because "the chemistry just wasn't right."

The Catholic League sent two letters to executive producer Barry Lando and issued the following press release on January 25:

"The entire Call to Action segment was, from beginning to end,

an exercise in intellectual dishonesty and journalistic malpractice. The decision to give high profile to the Catholic Church's radical fringe was pure politics, and it is nothing short of outrageous that Barry Lando and Mike Wallace solicited, and then rejected, views that would have provided for some semblance of fairness. Allowing extremists an uncontested opportunity to rail against the Catholic Church distorts the sentiments of most Catholics and provides succor for bigots.

"There is a difference between reporting dissent, and promoting it. By refusing to air interviews with Mary Ann Glendon and George Weigel, '60 Minutes' made clear its preference, extending to the disaffected a platform that they have never earned within the Catholic community. It is not hard to orchestrate any result, not when there is a determined effort to manipulate and steer the outcome. This is propaganda at work, not journalism."

In a letter to the Catholic League, "60 Minutes" defended its position by saying that no one from the Catholic hierarchy agreed to be interviewed (for reasons readily understood by everyone but those at "60 Minutes"). However, Bishop John Myers of Peoria, Illinois did agree to go on the show, but only on the condition that he be guaranteed an unedited three to four minutes to reply to the Call to Action piece. He was turned down. Importantly, this was before Wallace asked Glendon and Weigel to appear, making inexcusable the refusal of "60 Minutes" to run their interview.

The bottom line is this: Call to Action got a free ride, and the Catholic Church got a bum rap. Again.