

# A PABLUM CULTURE?

William A. Donohue

This past summer, *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich accused the Catholic League of being “too thin-skinned.” Though we were not the only example he provided, he began and finished his piece with us. He is concerned that when groups like the Catholic League protest plays like “Corpus Christi,” the result is self-censorship. His ultimate worry is that “The more self-censorship ensues, the more our culture becomes pabulum.”

I have good news for Frank: relax, there’s nothing to worry about. Not, at least, as he defines the problem. But the rest of us have something to worry about. It is not that our culture risks becoming like pabulum, it risks becoming like vomit.

A few months after Frank’s article appeared, I was asked by a reporter from the same newspaper whether our culture had grown weary of controversy. He, like Frank, was bothered by our protest of McNally’s play (that neither he nor Frank was bothered by the play is telling). He wondered whether it was good for society that those in the entertainment industry and the performing arts might be shying away from hot issues. Not to worry, I assured him.

I made it clear that there was absolutely nothing controversial about bashing Catholics—it happens all the time. It takes no guts, no fortitude, no brains. But bashing gays on TV or on Broadway would take plenty of guts, so much so that there isn’t anyone around with the nerve to do it. Or how about an A&E biography that put a positive spin on the late George Wallace? And by the way, did you read what *Time* magazine said about “Corpus Christi”? It said it might prove to be “intriguing.” It might, but so might a

script that projected an empathic understanding of Hitler's upbringing. Expect to see it in production?

The last thing those in Hollywood or on Broadway want to do is offend their friends. There's nothing unusual about that, it's just that their smugness is overbearing. After all, how much courage does it take to stick to your enemies? Like Catholics, for example.

A culture of pabulum wouldn't sport the rot that we experience daily. Driving to work means listening to talk-show hosts who are increasingly vulgar. Turn the dial and four-letter words dot the lyrics of rap music. We get to work only to hear office talk about the sexual life of our president, followed by jokes that used to be cited as proof of sexual harassment. On the internet we see advertisements for raunch, and much worse. The drive home leaves us stuck in traffic, forcing us to read the filthy bumper stickers in front of us. We try to relax at home by turning on the TV and are treated to sitcoms that feature discussions of bodily parts. Channel surfing means meeting Dr. Ruth. Or Monica.

Yet when the Catholic League complains about any of this, we are called to task as the bad guys. For example, *New York Times* writer Anita Gates says we live in "an era when a fictional Roman Catholic priest like the one on ABC's *Nothing Sacred* can be persecuted by conservative groups just for being open-minded." But if the show was nothing but fiction, why should she care if we "persecuted" it? Why would grown women who belong to something called Media Images and Religious Awareness (MIRA) still be shedding tears at a press conference a full year after the show aired? Was the loss of this fiction that hard for the sisters to bear?

Mary Atkay, a member of MIRA and a spokeswoman for the Sisters of Charity of Elizabeth, New Jersey, wasn't very charitable to the Catholic League when she said that we were "a group of fanatics, right-wing people." Mary is upset with us because we

put an end to her vicarious living: we are the ones responsible for getting her favorite TV show thrown off the air. I am sincerely disappointed that Mary didn't call me asking for dialogue. It shows an utter lack of compassion, but I'll get over it.

Mary accuses the Catholic League of harboring a "limited vision of the faith." Now I wonder what her take would be if she read a script that depicted progressive nuns as spoiled, disloyal, arrogant, hypocritical, self-righteous, amoral, dishonest old brats? Think she might call Jamie Tarses over at ABC and give her a tip? Think Jamie would be interested? Why not—it's only fiction—right?

The day before Frank Rich wrote his column accusing us of being "thin-skinned," the *New York Post* ran a story about a Superman comic strip that showed the Man of Steel fighting the Nazis. The Anti-Defamation League went ballistic. Why? Because the strip failed to mention that the Holocaust victims were Jews. Too bad that one got by Frank, it would have been interesting to see what he might have said.