

# A Protestant Looks A Catholic Bashing

*by Waller W. Benjamin*

My boyhood years during the 1940s were spent in a small town in southwestern Minnesota. There were many virtues in that idyllic community but religious tolerance and ecumenism were not among them. The virus of anti-Catholicism was as pervasive then as was polio during the dog days of July and August. Only unlike polio, hating Catholics was popular and widely supported.

Catholics were second class citizens, not quite fully American in belief, practice, and ethnic origin. Catholic adjudicatories were supposed to have a secret plan to subvert cherished American institutions by means of parochial schools. The board of our public school was entirely Protestant and the superintendent was on notice not to hire more than a token number of Catholics.

"Teachers, especially coaches, get very close to students," reflected one board member. "We don't want any proselytizing." Protestants inwardly rejoiced when a succession of priests were unsuccessful in raising money to build a parochial school. They breathed a sigh of relief when the inadequate funds went to refurbish a bingo parlor. "How characteristically Catholic," mused a Baptist pastor.

Fifty years ago we called Catholics "mackerel snappers" and nuns "penguins." There were lurid tales of lascivious sex between priests and imprisoned sisters behind monastery walls. The pope was called the anti-Christ by a number of minor precursors of Jimmy Swaggert.

Those were the days before John F. Kennedy. His election in 1960 was supposed to have symbolized the final acceptance of

Catholics as full-fledged citizens. His ancestors had seen signs "No Catholics or Dogs Need Apply" in Boston. Mobs had burned monasteries and rectories when Nativism and the Know-Nothing Party rode high in the saddle. During the Civil War, many WASPs subject to the draft paid Catholic immigrants \$120 to wear the Union blue in their stead. Tens of thousands of Catholic proletarians died to preserve the nation and free the slaves.

But Kennedy's election proved, said most political scientists, that this form of religious bigotry was now finally over. Tragically, recent events, many of them chronicled in *Catalyst*, have proved them wrong.

I am deeply troubled, as a Protestant religion professor, that the media have failed to come to the defense of the Catholic Church. If such attacks were directed against a Black Church, and Islamic mosque, or Native American rituals, outrage by the media, the professorate, and the opinion makers, would be fortissimo. When the Pope visited Denver in 1993, the media again gave the back of its hand to Catholics. It focused on those who disagree with established Church doctrine, such as Catholic feminists, homosexuals, and those who no longer participate in the church.

When a gay man, infected with HIV, suddenly recovered a "repressed memory" after 20 years and said Archbishop Bernardin sexually abused him, why did the media give knee jerk credence to his charges? The accusation has now been withdrawn but a sterling character has been defamed and sullied. Meanwhile, both the California and Minnesota Board of Medical Examiners are bringing charges against psychologists and psychiatrists who have been charged with injecting "repressed memories" of sexual abuse in their adolescent clients. The Catholic Church, it seems, has "deep pockets" for unethical counselors and their clients.

Catholic bashing makes good copy for there is a deep and

visceral hatred of Catholicism among the media elite and opinion makers. To be sure, at times church officials have not properly handled mentally and sexually sick priests. But then, had not this also been true of the legal, medical, and Protestant church adjudicatories? But where in the media is fairness, compassion, and understanding?

Hilton Kramer, a former *New York Times* reporter and now a writer with the *New York Post*, states that "the bias that the media has against Catholics has no rival anywhere in the population." Among many of my liberal and intellectual friends, it is fashionable to bash Catholicism. It is their form of anti-Semitism. The very existence of the Catholic Church offends them. "How can people believe 'that stuff'?" is their common mantra. Of course, as a Protestant, there are Catholic doctrines with which I disagree. That's why I am a Protestant.

Nevertheless, I am pleased that the Catholic Church is strikingly countercultural. It holds to a moral hierarchy in spite of the moral rot, drift, and pathology that stalks our land. A "go-with-the-flow" morality is no morality worthy of a name. Instead, Catholic moral universals are an anchor of comfort and guidance to millions in a way that a "feel-good" situationalism, relativism, and nihilism do not provide.

Unlike the mainline Protestantism, Protestant evangelicalism is forging common bonds with Catholic social witness. Both are against the increasing disrespect for life, media sensuality, public school incompetence and arrogance, Statist intrusion into familial and private matters, and the increasing diminishment of decency and civility in our public life. Both see the collapse of sphere sovereignty where an omniscient government ignores the historic boundaries of a free society and the canons of subsidiarity.

As a Protestant, I want Catholicism to flourish. The church has a core of teaching and tradition that has endured. It

knows that modernism is not necessarily right nor tradition necessarily archaic. It is not a weather vane that is subject to every changing moral or cultural fad. After thirty-seven years of teaching, I find that many of my Catholic students have a firm hold on life. They have been enriched, not impoverished, by their faith. There is little that is antiquarian, regressive, or bigoted in their familial or church training. They seem to have a spiritual centeredness and a moral compass that will guide them well in life.

So I plead with my liberal friends to embody that cardinal virtue of liberalism, tolerance, and take the pledge: "I promise to make Catholic bashing as politically incorrect as antipathy toward African Americans, Jews, Hispanics, Native Americans, and homosexuals." Moreover, I urge them to read contemporary Catholic theology and ethics so that their data base is larger than some hoary stories of those who have left the Church some time ago. Let us get beyond the paradigm of "Us versus Them" of an earlier bigoted America.

Our society needs a vibrant Catholicism to help heal the terrible social pathologies of our society. And that is why I want Catholic bashing to stop.

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