

A True Fighter for the Faith

Catholic Twin Circle

**editor Loretta G. Seyer interviews Catholic League President
William A. Donohue**

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On July 1, 1993, William A. Donohue, Ph.D., was appointed president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. Since that time the sociologist, professor and author has energized the anti-defamation organization that was founded by the late Fr. Virgil Blum, S.J. Donohue has also been quoted in numerous articles and has appeared on a variety of television and radio shows.

The new president is determined to protect Catholics and the Catholic Church from a variety of assaults that are becoming increasingly common in our relativistic, even nihilistic society. In the following interview, he examines the state of anti-Catholicism today and what Catholics can do about it.

CATHOLIC TWIN CIRCLE: What is the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights?

William A. Donohue, Ph.D.: The Catholic League was founded in 1973 by Fr. Virgil Blum, a Jesuit. He was teaching at Marquette University in Milwaukee.

It was dedicated to the proposition that defamation and discrimination were rife in our society against Catholics and that there was no lay Catholic organization out there to defend against them.

Fr. Blum's idea of this organization, which is certainly mine, is that this should be the analog, the natural analog of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) for B'nai B'rith. Jews have done

a far better job than Catholics defending their civil rights.

The Catholic League does speak to defamation issues principally; but, more broadly, it speaks to First Amendment issues. Any issue that reasonably falls under the rubric of civil rights or civil liberties is something that engages the Catholic League.

We're not, however, let me stress, a pro-life organization, we're not a pro-family organization, we're not a pro-voucher organization, though some people think that we are or would like to make us that.

There are plenty of good organizations out there which make a fine statement on family issues and vouchers and the question of abortion. But that's not the Catholic League.

If we try to become everything to everybody, we will fail. We have to be the organization that when Catholics are under attack or some teachings of the Catholic Church are under attack, the media instantly thinks of the Catholic League to go to and not anybody else.

If a cardinal or bishop comes under attack in an unfair or malicious way, whether that cardinal or bishop is liberal or conservative is not an issue for the Catholic League. What we're here to do is to say that Catholics – lay and clergy alike – have as much right to participate in public discourse as any other segment of our society.

We feel that Catholics should not be shy or apologetic or defensive about that. We have something to say – things of interest not only to Catholics but to non-Catholics as well. And we don't like the idea that people will disparage us. If people want to disagree – fine.

But when you go from disagreement into disdain, disparagement, derision, ridicule, bigotry, then you've crossed the line, and that's when the Catholic League will swing into action.

CTC: How is the Catholic League organized?

Donohue: The league is a national organization located in New York City, and we have various chapters around the country from which we try to mobilize people locally. We have a publication office in Milwaukee, which I think of as part of the national office.

The League is here to do several things – to testify when appropriate, to hold press conferences, to issue news releases. In essence, to defend Catholics from the kind of contemporary ridicule that we see.

We want to see that Catholics are given the same rights as blacks, Jews and homosexuals.

There are things that are said on television, in the movies, on radio, in theater, in dance and in college classrooms about Catholics that would never be tolerated if they were said about blacks, Jews, homosexuals or Hispanics . It's really gotten quite out of hand.

CTC: When Fr. Blum started the League, what kind of problems was he facing then in terms of anti- Catholicism, and what is the League facing now?

Donohue: Fr. Blum, I think, was particularly concerned about the degree to which Catholics had their rights subordinated by the state vis a vis the voucher program.

The Catholic League today, while it is sensitive to the voucher issue and does feel that Catholics have as much right to send their children to the school of their choice as anybody else, is more concerned about the unprecedented assault on the Church to discredit it and marginalize its impact. Let me give you an example of what I'm talking about. In the 18th, 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries, the kind of defamation and discrimination experienced by Catholics was more typically experienced by individual

Catholics – ethnic Catholics; Irish Catholics; people being discriminated against by immigration policy- as Southern and Eastern Europeans were in the 1921 and 1924 immigration acts; people being discriminated against on the job; in entering schools – it is well-known that the Ivy League schools had quotas for Catholics and Jews.

That kind of discrimination – the good news is – has largely subsided. There are very few instances where individual Catholics are denied a position in society either in employment or education or promotion because of their faith.

What is new, however, is that there is an attempt to discredit the teachings of the Catholic Church, particularly as they deal with sexual questions. There's an attempt to marginalize and privatize religion in general – essentially, to say that religion is something that private people do in the confines of their private institutions, churches and homes, but it should have no public ventilation.

I would regard that really as the mark of a bigot. Let me tell you why. If we took the same attitude toward music and art and said we have nothing against music or art, it's just that it doesn't belong in the public sphere – in a park, for example, in any type of display or demonstration – but, rather, it should be entertained by one in his own domicile, we'd regard that as an unfair abridgement. It's really stifling the life out of music and art to say that it should be demonstrated and shown only in one's home or inside some institution.

To do this to religion, I think, is to stifle it. The Catholic Church, in particular, is under attack because it's the last bastion of traditional moral authority in our society.

The Catholic Church today is strikingly counter-cultural. It is counter to the culture, which says that there's no moral hierarchy; that there's no clear way to distinguish between right and wrong; that everything is a matter of moral

neutrality; that making decisions about sexual behavior is no more different than someone choosing between chocolate, vanilla and strawberry.

The Catholic Church, of course, does not teach that. The Catholic Church holds there is a moral hierarchy; that sexuality is an act of love to be expressed within the confines of marriage for the purpose of procreation.

That's an entirely different concept than we see today where the cultural elite – by that I mean the people in the media, the professorate, the opinion makers in general – have a very relativistic, indeed I would say nihilistic, attitude toward a moral hierarchy.

I'm not certain what they want to put in place of what we've had, but I am certain that they think the traditional Christian perspective is one which is oppressive and I would regard that as a misguided interpretation of liberty, as well .

CTC: Is the Catholic League aligning with other religious groups?

Donohue: Yes. And we will enter into coalitions selectively.

I am opposed to the school of thought that says we shouldn't be talking at all to other like-minded peoples who are of a different religion.

I've been told for about 30 years about the wonders of ecumenism. I think that should cut as well for people who might be more conservative than liberal.

Many of my more liberal Catholic friends are always willing to raise the flag about how they've embraced Protestants, for example, who are like-minded on nuclear weapons and social justice, but who somehow feel aghast at the idea that more conservative Catholics and Protestants might get together.

Seems to me that there's a rather selective interest in ecumenism.

I have an interest in ecumenism, as well. But let me also say that we have an identity as a Catholic civil-rights organization, and we have to fight our own battles.

There will be occasions when there is the need to join hands. If, for example, a Jewish cemetery is assaulted by skinheads, I will be as quick to denounce that as if there was some defacement to some Catholic church. I have no problem with that.

I think that Catholics haven't done enough for themselves. Let me be explicit: I don't mean the clergy.

The clergy – by and large, with certain exceptions – are so busy doing all kinds of things to represent the Church already, that they don't have the time or the resources. And I might add to some extent, even the credibility, with many segments of our society anymore.

Lay Catholics have been entirely too dependent on the clergy. It's understandable given the hierarchical nature of the Church; it may be one of the negative sides to it. But the fact of the matter is that Vatican II gave lay Catholics a charge to be more participatory. Yet, they haven't been. The ball is in our court.

If Catholics act through the Catholic League or other like-minded organizations, they will also get over that separation of Church and state hurdle because as lay Catholics we have as much right to say what is right and proper for the best interests of public policy and society as any other segment of the society.

We don't have to be burdened the way cardinals, bishops and priests are in terms of what we can and cannot say in terms of the establishment cause.

So, I think that the time has come in the '90s for lay Catholics to become energized. And, if we have about 59 million of us, even if only half of those people – only 30 million – feel energized to do something about it, that's a tremendous segment of our society.

CTC: What could Catholics do both individually and on a larger scale?

Donohue: They can put heat on bureaucrats. Bureaucrats don't like to take the heat. Most of them, in fact, might be surprisingly more on our side than people seem to realize.

Bureaucrats tend to bend with the wind. And the people who've been putting the heat on the bureaucrats have been people who have an agenda which is counter to the Catholic agenda.

Catholic parents cannot continue to complain over cocktails on a Saturday evening about how bad the culture is. They have to write the letter to the editor – the most read segment of any newspaper is the letters to the editor. They have to phone in.

They have to do things that aren't going to take an inordinate amount of time because people are stretched. I understand that, but they have to show up at schoolboard meetings. They have to raise their voices at PTA meetings. They have to get involved in an occasional demonstration, join a boycott, belong to the Catholic League or other like-minded organizations.

Introduce other people to your concerns. Be more vocal and not be so timid about getting involved with other people. Talk to your pastor and find out what people are being brought into your local church for outside guest speakers. Find out what your local Catholic college or university is doing; it might be a real eye-opener.

There's a whole bunch of ways in which people can get involved

that aren't so costly in time as to eat up the schedule. But it means, first of all, getting angry about what's happening and then making the decision to do something without overreacting. It's always important not to overreact, because you become your own worst enemy.

I do believe that public discourse is the best way. Occasionally, it might mean a lawsuit. I'm not wild about going to the courts as a way to resolve our problems – only when necessary.

But, ultimately I don't think the problems that we're talking about are resolved in the courts. They're going to be resolved by the cultural elite. It's going to be by changing people's consciousness, by getting people to understand that there are certain ideas that ought to be taboo.

We have to make Catholic bashing as politically incorrect as the bashing against blacks, Jews and homosexuals. If we could do that, we'll make tremendous strides.