

ABC AND NBC SEEK TO OFFEND EVERYONE

In a new twist on the old saw that the best defense is a good offense, ABC and NBC are now bragging that in some of their shows, they seek to offend everyone equally.

The league complained to ABC about two editions of "Politically Incorrect" that aired back-to-back on October 8 and 9. The October 8 show featured actor Ed Begley, Jr. discussing such things as Catholic guilt and cafeteria-style Catholicism. The comment we took offense to was by Bill Mahr: "You know, the pope says you shouldn't masturbate or have abortions, but that's fine for him, he's an elderly man." The audience, as usual, couldn't restrain themselves from laughter.

The next night journalist Jerry Nachman offered the observation that "The Vatican purportedly has the largest pornography collection in the world." As this scene fades out, a woman follows with a quip about the pope's love for pornography.

Put together, these shows made us ask ABC whether it was "Catholic-bashing week on 'Politically Incorrect?'"

Over at NBC, on the October 7 edition of the "Late Night With Conan O'Brien," we were treated to a caricature of Charlton Heston: there was an irreverent portrayal of a Jesus machine-gunning Pontius Pilate.

On the October 14 Conan O'Brien show, there was a depiction of the pope sitting atop an oil gusher, celebrating the discovery of Vatican oil. While not our cup of tea, we explicitly said to NBC that this show did not merit a complaint. But the October 17 show did.

It was on that show that O'Brien did his routine "at random" interview with audience members. One of the members said he was studying for the priesthood. O'Brien used this opportunity to denigrate priestly celibacy, singing that the man would "always be horny" but would "never have sex," and would wind up "a shriveled old man...alone in his room with his gonads on a shelf."

The response we got from the two networks was nothing short of amazing. ABC admitted that "distasteful comments about all ethnic and religious groups are often made." Thanks, guys. Then, in a remarkable statement, we were told that "the program goes to great lengths to make sure they offend as many groups as possible." Nothing like equality.

NBC took the same line. Referring to "Late Night With Conan O'Brien," we were told that the show "is one of the network's most irreverent programs and has lampooned almost every ethnic, religious and racial segment of the American population." Did they get the Eskimos?

As to whether Catholics are singled out on Conan O'Brien, we were told, in no uncertain terms, that we should "please be aware that in previous versions of this particular piece, groups such as non-English speakers and the elderly have all been recipients of the same type of song delivered by Mr. O'Brien." How reassuring.

So there you have it. Catholics are bashed and we are told to relax, it's happening to everyone. But somehow we doubt that the intensity and the frequency of the "lampooning" is equal.

Have something to say? Write to Christine Hikawa, vice president of Broadcast Standards & Practices, ABC, Inc., 77 West 66 Street, New York, New York 10023 and to Andrew Brewer, vice president of Program Content, Systems and Standards, NBC Entertainment, 30 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, New York 10112.