

ABCNEWS.com REWRITES NEWS STORY AFTER PROTEST

Most of the reporting of Rome's World Youth Day was fair and balanced. But there was one story that we objected to that rendered an unusual result: most of the offensive parts of the story were dropped from future web postings.

The story in question appeared August 17 on the ABC News website, ABCNEWS.com. Reporter Sue Masterman ridiculed Catholicism in her report, "Holy Disorder: Kids Are Dressed to Thrill at the Vatican Bash." Her article was based on the throngs of youths who converged on Rome for Catholic event. Here are some of her observations, as original posted:

- "The Vatican's strict dress code for visitors to St. Peter's Church in Rome has collapsed..." Instead, there are "scantily clad pilgrims" wearing "hot pants, miniskirts, tube tops and other scanty clothing. Dogs, however, are another question. However well covered in fur, they have to stay outside. They have no souls to redeem, the church decrees, thus access is denied. No holy water for them."
- Priests are hearing confessions "from all youngsters who want absolution from sins they have hardly had time to commit."
- "If God, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the Holy Ghost are getting to see more than usual of the flesh which He created in places where the Roman Catholic clergy want it covered up, then it does not seem to be causing much divine offense."

William Donohue called the office of ABCNEWS.com and then

released a statement saying, "I do not believe for one second that Masterman would snicker at any other religion. For some reason, she has it out for Catholicism. We will press this issue with ABC officials to find out what her problem is." What was particularly troubling about this story was that it was presented as "hard news," and not as an editorial.

Within 24 hours of our protest, the first statement that we objected to was toned down and the other two were eliminated altogether. The league's director of communications, Pat Scully, then called ABCNEWS.com to discuss this matter further. It was admitted, rather begrudgingly, that the story could be seen as offensive to Catholics and that is why it was changed.

A follow-up call was also placed to Donohue to see if he was pleased. He reported that he was and thanked him for his cooperation.