

AIR FORCE AND NAVY TAKE AIM AT CATHOLICS

The Catholic League is now engaged in a struggle with the U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Navy over the constitutional rights of Catholics. Both branches of the armed forces, the league charges, are guilty of promoting a politically-correct agenda at the expense of Catholic rights.

Lt. Ryan Berry is a 26 year-old Catholic Air Force officer who objects, as a matter of conscience, to serving with a woman in an underground missile silo duty.

From May 1997 to December 1998, Lt. Berry, who is married, received a religious exemption from the U.S. Air Force from working in such close quarters with a woman; Berry said that such an assignment would create "an occasion of sin" and therefore he could not in good conscience accept it. But now the Air Force has changed its mind—after being pressured by a few female and male officers—and is punishing Berry for not accepting this assignment.

When the Catholic League learned of this case, it immediately issued a news release in support of Lt. Berry, citing the religious nature of his request. The league also emphasized that given the problem of sexual harassment in the armed forces, what Lt. Berry is asking for should easily be accepted.

In the case of U.S. Navy, the Catholic League has come down strongly on the side of the Knights of Columbus in a battle with the Naval Security Group Northwest, a base located in Chesapeake, Virginia. The commander of that base, Captain R.W. Jerome, has barred the Knights from meeting in the naval chapel; it is located just outside the base. The reason: the Knights discriminate against women.

The Catholic League pointed out to the Navy, and to the media, that "The operative directive from the Department of Defense bars 'unlawful discrimination,' making plain its willingness to countenance reasonably-grounded distinctions (by the way of analogy, the Fourth Amendment bars searches and seizures that are 'unreasonable,' thus allowing for reasonable ones)."

The media attention that these related issues garnered was impressive. On August 4, the Catholic League sponsored a press conference on the matter of Lt. Berry; it was held on Capitol Hill. And in the instance of the K of C, the league promised that if the Knights decide to sue the Navy, the league would do likewise.

In neither case is there any national security imperative at work.