

AIR FORCE MISSES ON SEX AND RELIGION

From May 1997 to December 1998, Lt. Ryan Berry received a religious exemption from the U.S. Air Force from working in close quarters with a woman in an underground missile launch center. But the Air Force has now changed its position and is punishing Lt. Berry, a married Catholic, for exercising his religious rights. Catholic teaching instructs against putting oneself in the occasion of sin.

Catholic League president William Donohue, himself an Air Force veteran, wrote a letter to Gen. Michael E. Ryan, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, asking him to intervene in this case; copies of his letter were also sent to Lt. Berry's superiors, Maj. Gen. Thomas H. Neary and Col. Ronald Haeckel, as well as to Archbishop Edwin O'Brien, who heads the military archdiocese (O'Brien supports Ryan). What follows is the substance of Donohue's remarks:

"Lt. Berry, following the dictates of his conscience—one which is grounded in his religion, Roman Catholicism—finds objectionable the requirement that he must work in the close quarters of a nuclear missile launch center with a person of the opposite sex. Lt. Berry, who is stationed at Minot AFB in North Dakota, had his religious objections sustained for a year and a half before they were violated. Why his religious objections cannot be accommodated now remains inexplicable.

"It is no secret that the armed forces have had their share of problems with regards to sexual harassment. It would seem only logical, therefore, that every reasonable effort be made to honor the preferences of those men and women who find working in close quarters with persons of the opposite sex to be problematic. It is difficult to believe that there is any national security imperative that argues against respecting

Lt. Berry's free exercise of religion."

The Catholic League is currently weighing its options in the event the Air Force does not reverse its position.