

ALL WE ASK FOR IS FAIRNESS

William A. Donohue

Advocacy organizations like the Catholic League have to expect that not everyone is going to like what they do. But is it too much to ask that our critics be fair? Fairness is not some slippery subjective property—it simply means that vis-à-vis other similarly situated persons or organizations, the same rules apply.

The lead story in this issue concerns ESPN's Dana Jacobson. At a wild ESPN party, she got blasted and rambled off some vile remarks that got her into trouble with the Catholic League. She was subsequently suspended and had to apologize. We could have pressed for more, but decided to drop it. We played fairly. Unfortunately, some of our critics did not.

Some on our side have asked why we didn't demand that Jacobson be fired. They quite rightly point out that others who have offended certain groups pay a big price. Jacobson may have been trying to be funny, they say, but so was Imus. And he got canned. She may have been drunk, they add, but so was Mel Gibson. And he was ripped apart.

In the conference call I had with the two ESPN officials—one was in New York, the other was in Baltimore—it became clear what happened. The "roast" quickly got out of hand and Jacobson went off the rails. Totally bombed, she started mixing it up with Charlie Weis, the Notre Dame football coach. Jacobson, being a Michigan graduate, saw an opportunity to roast her alma mater's rival. It then got ugly.

Her first salvo, "F*** Notre Dame," is the kind of foul-mouthed remark that has been said a million times. Then she used the same obscenity regarding "Touchdown Jesus." For the unacquainted, at Notre Dame there is a huge mural of Jesus on the wall of the library that faces the football field; he is

shown with his hands outstretched above him, in typical touchdown fashion. She ended her rant with the obscenity about Jesus.

From the discussion I had with the ESPN officials, it seems plain that the "Touchdown Jesus" quip was occasioned by her initial rip at Notre Dame. In all likelihood, her last comment would not have been made had the "Touchdown Jesus" obscenity not been made. In other words, given her condition, she easily slid from one to the other. This is not an excuse (and she never tried to excuse herself), but it does put things in context. Lastly, it is not unimportant to note that Jacobson had no previous record of anti-Catholicism.

By accepting her apology, we sought to distinguish ourselves from those who always go for the jugular. Indeed, I said on CNN Headline News what I said to cnsnews.com: "My name is not Al Sharpton. I'm not out for blood. People screw up. I live in the real world. I understand context."

But none of this mattered to Tom Hoffarth, media critic for a west coast media outlet, dailynews.com. "The Catholic League (whoever that is)," he wrote, "finally played the role of Rev. Al Sharpton and, as these things go, began the doctrine of forgiveness by trying to have her [Jacobson] punished."

This is remarkable. Sharpton pressed for Imus to be fired. We didn't press for Jacobson to be fired. But we're as guilty of overreacting as Sharpton. By the way, when Sharpton got Imus fired, Hoffarth was delighted.

Then there was the sight of Keith Olbermann, MSNBC's left-wing talking head. He accused me of "doing for Catholicism exactly what the Spanish Inquisition did for Catholicism." After describing what Jacobson said, and mentioning her suspension, he opined, "Not enough for Donohue. He claims she, quote, attacked Jesus Christ." His closer was precious: "Mr. Donohue, you do realize you sound like the Muslims who rioted over

Muhammad cartoons, right?"

Sure. Because I don't press for Jacobson to be fired, I'm no different from machete-wielding Muslims. Oh, yes, when Imus offended African Americans, Olbermann lobbied the MSNBC top brass to fire him.

Fairness, then, is apparently in short supply with our critics. But this cannot be used as justification for us treating others—including our unfair critics—unjustly.

For example, when two persons at Bank of America called on behalf of the CEO, Kenneth B. Lewis, to say that they conveyed to Carnegie Hall their concerns about the indecent "Jerry Springer—The Opera" concert, I said I would credit the organization on TV. I made good on my pledge on "Fox and Friends." I even wrote to Mr. Lewis commending the two employees who called me. Fairness demanded that I do so.

As anyone who follows the Catholic League knows, we don't play softball with our adversaries. But we also don't hit below the belt. I've said it before, and I will say it again, the Catholic League is "responsibly aggressive." We are responsible because we are Catholic, and we are aggressive because we are a civil rights organization. There's no inherent contradiction in that.

Our unfair critics have to live with what they say. We do, too. One thing I love about this job is that I don't have to lie.