

AN EXCHANGE WITH “FRONTLINE”

“Valentina’s Nightmare” is the story of a brave young African girl who barely survived a brutal massacre in Rwanda in 1994. Her family was among the 800,000 Tutsis who were killed in the genocide. The PBS program, “FRONTLINE,” aired this story in April. Unfortunately, it implicated the Catholic Church in a way that was unfair.

In a letter sent to PBS stations around the country, Jim Bracciale, director of communications for PBS, stated that “Human rights groups and survivors say that although [Catholic] clergy and religious workers were slain during the genocide, others condoned or even encouraged the murders.” He added that “In past pronouncements over the mass killings, Pope John Paul II defended the church, saying it ‘could not be responsible for the misdeeds of its members who have acted against evangelical law.’”

William Donohue wrote to Bracciale asking two questions regarding the first charge: “Precisely which human rights groups said—and with what evidence—that ‘others’ (meaning Catholic clergy) ‘condoned and even encouraged the murders’ in Rwanda? And who are these members of the clergy who allegedly said such things?”

Regarding the comment on the pope, Donohue said “Surely you know the pope does not defend mass killings. And surely you know that if someone on your staff commits misdeeds that it would be unfair for me to criticize you by charging that you are defending your office by not taking responsibility for the behavior of your subordinates.”

Bracciale called Donohue once he received his letter. Though the conversation was cordial, Donohue still didn’t get an answer to his questions regarding the human rights groups and clergy who supposedly made charges against the Church.

Regarding the comment by the pope, there was clearly a difference in interpretation.

Bracciale sent Donohue a copy of the video and a letter that further explained his position. “While you are correct that the Pope—and the Catholic Church—cannot be held responsible for the acts of individual members, the Pope’s statement does not squarely rebuff those individuals. Instead, as the church’s spiritual leader, he asks those involved in these crimes to reconcile with God and ‘to bear the consequences of the deeds.’”

The letter closes with the statement, “I believe this is the central difference in our interpretation of the Pope’s statement.” Bracciale is partly right: the difference essentially comes down to how culpable the pope is for not condemning the killers. But anyone familiar with the Church, and with this pope, in particular, should know that condemning people for wrongdoing is not exactly the Catholic way.