

ANTI-CATHOLIC BIAS SHOWN BY UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

For the past few months, the Catholic League has been involved in a dispute with the University of Virginia over an incident of religious bias. It all began last January when a student from Chaminade High School—the flagship Catholic school on Long Island—was interviewed by the Long Island Selection Committee for the Jefferson Scholars Program at the University of Virginia.

On January 15, Peter M. Folan was notified that he would be interviewed by the scholarship committee on January 28. He was told that the interview would “make your application come to life.” It should be noted that on Folan’s application, he listed his position as president of Chaminade’s Catholic League chapter. It should also be noted that in 1995, the Catholic League successfully sued the University of Virginia in the Rosenberger decision, a Supreme Court ruling that secured the right to school funding for Christian publications.

The panel of three women and one man began their questioning of Folan by asking, “What is your relationship with God?” This was an odd, if not totally inappropriate, way for a state school to begin an interview. It got worse: the only topic of discussion for the first fifteen to twenty minutes of the half-hour interview was Catholicism.

Folan was asked the following questions: “Do you believe in the infallibility of the Pope?”; “What if the Pope said something completely ridiculous, would you follow him anyway?”; “What are your feelings on women priests?”; “Is there any issue that you disagree with in terms of the Roman Catholic Church?” And so on. This was followed by the obviously dishonest statement, “Don’t worry, your answer

doesn't matter to me either way."

The next part of the discussion revolved around Folan's role as president of the Catholic League chapter. Folan mentioned the protest that the chapter launched against the anti-Catholic movie, Priest, and this, in turn, led the panel to grill him over his involvement.

On February 26, Folan sent a letter of protest to James H. Wright, director of the Jefferson Scholars Program, explaining the reasons for his outrage. Wright's response was to defend the interview committee by stating that it "was not biased against you or any other candidate for reasons of religion, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, or opinions held." He also offered the predictable line that we "are truly sorry for any misunderstanding that may have occurred as a part of the selection process." But, of course, there was no misunderstanding: all parties to the interview knew exactly what was going on.

On March 6, Catholic League president William Donohue wrote a letter to Mr. Wright asking him to more fully explain the selection committee's behavior. Wright again defended the university, claiming that "The Committee is comprised of dedicated, conscientious individuals who approach their responsibility with care and diligence."

Not satisfied, Donohue took his complaint to a) the United States Department of Education b) Virginia Governor George Allen and c) the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (the accrediting body for the University of Virginia). In his letter, Donohue explained what had occurred and then registered the league's objections, which included the following statements.

"I am convinced that Peter Folan has told the truth and that the University of Virginia officials implicated in this matter are being intentionally uncooperative. The University

of Virginia is a state-supported school. As such it is obligated not to transverse church and state boundaries. Not only has this happened, but religious harassment and an invasion of privacy has also occurred."

The U.S. Department of Education responded by saying that this matter should be taken up with the Department of Justice, and therefore forwarded the case to them. Governor Allen asked John Casteen, the president of the University of Virginia, to review the matter and respond directly to Dr. Donohue. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools submitted a complaint form to be filed by Mr. Folan, but also took the occasion to question Dr. Donohue about pursuing this case.

G. Jack Allen, associate executive director of the association, raised the following questions, stating that he "was curious about the nature of your complaint." "Are you saying that the kinds of questions asked Mr. Folan were a violation of his civil rights? Are you also saying that asking these kinds of questions revealed bias on the part of the questioners? Is it your position that these kinds of questions should not be asked in the give and take of academic debate or of determining the reasoning ability of applicants for scholarships?"

Dr. Donohue was not impressed with the tone of Mr. Allen's questions and responded accordingly. "Never have I heard of a prospective student being grilled by the authorities from a state school about his or her religious beliefs. The type of questions that Mr. Folan was asked were clearly designed to draw him out, to have him reveal his perspective on the Roman Catholic Church. What earthly bearing could this possibly have in assessing his suitability for a scholarship? Is this common practice? Are Jews asked such questions? What about non-believers, are they asked why they believe in nothing?"

Donohue concluded with the following: "Questions that speak to private matters have no legitimate role to play in assessing

people for a scholarship in a state school. That is why homosexuals are not asked to explain what they do in bed and with whom. Neither should Catholics be asked to explain the basis of their beliefs.”

This case is not over, but readers of Catalyst need to know what has been happening. We will keep you posted as events unfold.