

ANTI-CATHOLICISM AT THE END OF THE CENTURY

William A. Donohue

The new millennium actually doesn't begin until the year 2001, but I don't want to quibble with conventional wisdom, so I'll pretend that we are now finishing the 20th century. The serious question that needs to be addressed is, "What is the state of anti-Catholicism at the end of the century"?

There are two genres of anti-Catholicism, one of which is directed at individual Catholics, and the other of which is directed at the institutional Church. The Catholic League's mission is to combat both: we defend individual Catholics and the institutional Church from defamation and discrimination. To be sure, the latter problem consumes most of our energy, though the former has not been erased.

At the turn of this century, attacks against individual Catholics were commonplace. The Irish had gone through their worst years in America in the nineteenth century, but the first few decades in this century were particularly hard on southern and eastern Europeans. Indeed, the Immigration Laws of 1921 and 1924 were designed to drastically limit the number of such persons entering the U.S. That most just happened to be Catholic was no coincidence.

In 1928, Al Smith, a Catholic, ran for president, forcing the Rev. Bob Jones to remark, "I'd rather see a nigger in the White House." Throughout the first half of this century, Catholics, as well as Jews, had a hard time being accepted at Ivy League colleges. Ditto in the workplace: some of the most prestigious jobs in the most prestigious companies were closed to Catholics and Jews. We all know about the compromises that JFK had to brook in order to make it to the White House, but

it least he got there, signaling that Catholics could travel further than Tammany Hall.

JFK's ascendancy, coming as it did in the decade that saw the passage of the historic Civil Rights Act of 1964, meant that discrimination against Catholics was fading. But the level of discrimination that a people suffer is not necessarily a reliable index for measuring prejudice: discrimination is action taken against a person, or group of persons, while prejudice is an attitudinal variable (as the psychologist Gordon W. Allport said in the 1950s, prejudice is an *unwarranted* attitude, favorably or unfavorably expressed, against a person or group of persons).

Think of it this way. A merchant who is deeply prejudiced against group X may treat cordially a person who belongs to group X, simply because green—the color of money—means more to him than the person's race, religion or ethnicity. That is one of the nice things about a market economy—greed typically stops prejudice from becoming discrimination (under socialism, discrimination triumphs while greed remains unchecked).

Having said as much, it can safely be said that while discrimination against Catholics has receded, prejudice has not. In 1995, the National Conference (formerly the National Conference of Christians and Jews) commissioned a major survey on prejudice in the U.S. What they found was that prejudice against Catholics was the number one prejudice in the nation, trumping prejudice against Asian-Americans, Latino-Americans, African-Americans, Jews and Muslims. Right below the surface, then, there is reason for concern, though it would be irresponsible to say there is reason for alarm.

The other problem, defamation against the institutional Church, has not experienced a decline; indeed there has been an explosion in this kind of bigotry at the end of the century. Most of the attacks are aimed at Church teachings that deal with authority or sexuality.

As Ronald Rychlak wisely observes in this issue, the Cornwell attack on Pius XII cannot be understood absent an appreciation for Cornwell's hatred of the papacy. Like many so-called Catholics, Cornwell has an authority problem: self-absorbed, these radical individualists will go to their grave protesting any authority that speaks of moral absolutes. No one will command them to do anything, they holler, too arrogant to realize that it is useless to try to defeat nature and nature's God.

Then there is the matter of sexuality. The Church's sexual reticence does not sit well with those who entertain a libertine-no-holds-barred-interpretation of liberty. Which is why they die. Physically, psychologically, socially and spiritually, the philosophy that associates freedom with genital liberation kills. But they can't figure it out. More accurately, they don't want to figure it out. Which is why they die.

"The Church has something to say," I recently told the *New York Times*. "People can agree or disagree, but I would hope when they disagree, they can do it respectfully. There's a cacophony of catcalls stopping that message from getting out at the moment and what I want to do is give it a fair hearing—and then walk away." With your help, we'll do it.

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.