

# ANTI-CATHOLICISM BECOMES AN ELECTION ISSUE

The recent flap over the Bob Jones University appearance by Governor George W. Bush has been the source of much controversy. The Catholic League's position on this important issue needs to be understood by all our members.

The Catholic League criticized Bush for his appearance at the school, defended him against the charge of anti-Catholicism, accepted his apology, criticized Senator John McCain for exploiting the issue and noted the hypocrisy of those Democrats who just now discovered anti-Catholicism.

We are well aware that Ronald Reagan and George Bush visited Bob Jones University when running for president. The governor of South Carolina, a Democrat, also visited the school. McCain's point man in South Carolina, Lindsey Graham, received an honorary doctorate from the university. So it appeared as though there was nothing unusual about George W. Bush's visit.

However, there were two things about his visit that were different: a) it came at a time—2000—when the public is more sensitive to the issue of anti-Catholicism than it has been in some time (many pundits have credited this to the Catholic League) and b) he kicked off his campaign in South Carolina there, and thereby sent a message to Catholics that, no matter how unintended, was regrettable. We took note of this last point in a news release of February 10.

On February 11, the *New York Times* published a letter by Bill Donohue that agreed with columnist Bob Herbert for taking Bush to task for his Bob Jones University rally. Donohue noted that on the school's website, they carry an article that brands the Catholic Church "a satanic counterfeit," an "ecclesiastic tyranny" and "the Mother of Harlots." The Catholic League

president explained that "It is one thing to maintain theological disagreements, but quite another to disparage another religion. Those seeking public office should never genuflect toward those who embrace the latter."

Unfortunately, in the immediate aftermath of Bush's February 2 campaign stop at Bob Jones University, he and his supporters failed to address the school's anti-Catholicism, though they did not hesitate to condemn the institution's ban on interracial dating. This provoked the Catholic League to step up its criticism of Bush.

For example, on February 13, Bush was prodded by Tim Russert on "Meet the Press" to comment on the school's anti-Catholicism and the best he could do was to say, "I don't associate with the thought. First of all, that was a 1982 quote by a man now passed away." He did not mention that the anti-Catholic quote is flagged on the school's web page in 2000, along with several other bigoted statements.

On February 15, when given a chance to comment on this during his presidential debate on CNN, Bush let the opportunity go. On February 17, he told CNN "I support people from all walks of life being able to date," but said nothing about the school's anti-Catholicism.

On February 13, on "Face the Nation," Bush supporter Pat Robertson addressed the school's racism, but not its anti-Catholicism. Bush supporter Haley Barbour on February 16 on "Crossfire" never condemned the school's anti-Catholicism when the subject came up. On February 16, Bush supporter Rep. Jennifer Dunn on "Hannity and Colmes" followed suit, as she did again the next night on "Hardball."

Bush supporter Rep. J.C. Watts spoke against the school's racism on CNN's "Early Edition" on February 16 and did the same thing on February 17 on "Hardball" without ever addressing the school's anti-Catholicism. Bush supporter Rep.

Tim Hutchinson, and his Bush-supporting brother Rep. Asa Hutchinson, in an AP story on February 16 spoke against the school's position on race, but said nothing about the school's anti-Catholicism.

At this point, the Catholic League issued the following statement to the press: "The evidence is in: Bush and his friends find it difficult to condemn the anti-Catholicism that marks Bob Jones University. We need to know why."

If Bush got nervous after he lost the New Hampshire primary to McCain, it was McCain who panicked after losing South Carolina to Bush. The Arizona senator now sought to exploit the issue by authorizing and paying for a flood of phone calls to Republican voters in Michigan, the next primary stop. The "Catholic Voter Alert" phone messages labeled McCain "a friend of Catholics," informing voters of Bush's visit to the anti-Catholic school in South Carolina.

When the McCain camp was asked about these phone messages, they denied having anything to do with them. Bush, however, charged McCain with being behind them. This led Donohue to criticize both the phone calls and Bush; it was "wrong to accuse the McCain camp of orchestrating these phone calls when he now admits he lacks the evidence," Donohue told the media.

But then the next day, the *New York Times*, on February 23, broke the story that McCain had indeed promoted the phone calls. The outright distortions that McCain and his staff then engaged in only added to the problem. This led Donohue to lambaste McCain and his campaign manager, Rick Davis, for deceiving the public.

Appearing on several national TV shows, Donohue continued to criticize McCain and his supporters for maintaining that the phone calls were not meant to accuse Bush of anti-Catholicism; McCain said they were simply meant to remind voters that Bush had gone to the anti-Catholic school. But Donohue wasn't

buying it: this was no FYI (for your information) educational memo, he said. This was demagoguery—an attempt to intimidate voters into voting against Bush.

On February 24, Donohue was asked by Ollie North and Paul Begala on MSNBC-TV's "Equal Time" what Bush needed to do to put this issue behind him. Donohue replied that Bush had to do two things: a) stop with the "apple pie rhetoric" about how he opposes anti-Catholicism and instead speak directly to the Bob Jones appearance and b) apologize to Catholics for unwittingly offending their sensibilities. The next day Bush wrote a letter to John Cardinal O'Connor that did just that.

The Bush letter was written on Friday, February 25, but it was not made public until it was received by the New York Archbishop; a copy was also sent to Donohue. On Sunday evening, February 26, Donohue was contacted by the *Today Show*: they wanted him on TV the next morning to discuss the apology. He agreed and accepted the apology. At the end of the interview, Donohue took the occasion to tell host Matt Lauer that we should now focus on Al Gore's Buddhist temple visit and discuss why some of Gore's friends in Hollywood produce movies that attack Catholicism (Harvey Weinstein of Miramax is a big Gore contributor).

In a statement released to the media, Donohue said "A touchstone of Catholicism is forgiveness, the recognition that wrongdoers who are sorry for their offense should be forgiven. It would be inconsistent with our faith, therefore, if we as Catholics did not forgive Gov. Bush for this incident." Robert Novak, on CNN's *Crossfire*, held up the league's new release and read this portion on TV.

This issue was no sooner over when McCain labeled Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell "the forces of evil." This was quickly denounced by the Catholic League for trivializing the meaning of evil. "Hitler, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot were evil," we said.

Because some Democrats were making hay with this issue, we took the opportunity to issue a news release, "Democrats Discover Anti-Catholicism." We chastised the Clinton administration for giving us Dr. Jocelyn Elders in 1993 as Surgeon General and James Hormel in 1999 as Ambassador to Luxembourg. Elders has made many anti-Catholic remarks and Hormel gave his approval to the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence.

Some Democrats have also exploited the league's criticism of those Republicans responsible for the House Chaplain mess. Never before have we gotten such fast friends, we told the media. However, we cannot let the prospect of opportunism stop us from doing what is right, and that is why it is important for us to keep focused and not get pulled into political squabbles.

The Catholic League has no favorite in the election and will continue to scrutinize the comments of all candidates for public office. It is our sincere hope that religious baiting will end so that the issues most Americans care about—moral values, education, health care, military readiness—will get the attention they deserve.