

Anti-Catholicism... Subtly

*A poster which hung in my fifth-grade English classroom depicted a comically dressed Charlie Brown. He appeared to be perplexed and somewhat deep in thought as he said "Maturity is the ability to laugh at yourself." There is a danger in becoming too sensitive, so thin-skinned that we can't even enjoy a light-hearted look at our faith. (How many could really find fault with Bing Crosby in "Bells of St. Mary's," or Fr. Mulcahy in M*A*S*H?) But lately, it seems as though too much is being passed off as acceptable, as not offensive enough to merit a response. This attitude of approval needs to be reexamined.*

There is a certain discernment process in determining the seriousness of a criticism or critique of the Catholic Church and its members. There is no set gauge by which we can measure harm – what offends some is likely to be shrugged off by others. While it is important not to overreact, it is equally important not to be passive in the face of bigotry.

Consider the following, all of which were brought to our attention during the last week of February: (for the outcomes, see future issues of *Catalyst*):

- In the comic strip **Non Sequitur** by Wiley (*Washington Post*, 2/18/94), under the caption, "The Beginning of a Crisis in Faith," one cardinal remarks to another, "Something's wrong ... I'm not feeling guilty about anything."
- From the syndicated cartoon **Mother Goose and Grim** by Mike Peters (2/23/94), the caption, "When the dust settled, the bar was a wreck, bodies and broken chairs everywhere; but no one ever again called St. Francis a sissy," accompanies a caricature of St. Francis of Assisi walking amidst a wrecked bar scene.
- Radio station KGB K-Pop of San Diego, California, broadcasts

a "confessional" program each Wednesday morning. "Reverend Dave," assisted by "Sr. Dunn," hosts "Lash Wednesday," a call-in program where sinners can receive "absolution of sins against society," among other things. The winner, declared the "sin, sinniest sinner" wins a prize ranging from videotapes to vacations for what Rev. Dave considers to be the most "heinous crime," nearly all of which are sexually vulgar.

- US West Direct's newest yellow pages telephone directory contains nursing home ads which are nearly devoid of religious references. US West contends that they were merely abiding by the non-discrimination policy as established by the Federal Fair Housing Act when they removed logo's and changed descriptions in ads for two nursing homes, one Catholic and one Lutheran.

- Mother Productions, a 5-year-old trading-card company in Anaheim, California, recently unveiled its newest collection. "Perverted Priests," a set of 36 cards, promises "100% unnatural corrupted clergy, demented deacons, maniac messiahs, sinister ministers, heinous horny healers and lesbian nuns."

While these examples run from the benign to the contemptible, it is the cumulative effect which is actually the most damaging. The dramatic rise in physical and verbal attacks on the clergy, religious and houses of worship provide grim testimony to the long term effects of even the most subtle jokes. The attitude of the nation has been completely altered in little more than one generation. Society no longer affords to clergy and religious the traditional level of respect. The Eucharist is desecrated, churches are vandalized and religious life receives unmerciful commentary in editorial cartoons, from politicians and comedians.

Catholics are relatively new (or slow?) to the fight for civil rights. Anti-Catholicism does not roll off the tongue as readily as does anti-Semitism. As Catholics, we have not established the notion in society that anti-Catholicism is as

unacceptable as any other form of discrimination. Those most to blame for this lack of recognition are Catholics themselves. Yes, the media, public officials, Hollywood and others all contribute, but in the end, they will carry the offenses only as far and as long as we allow it. For a better perspective on how skewed the treatment of Catholics is, try substituting another race, class, religion or such group into a common stereotype. Have we seen jokes that infer that all black men are pedophiles based on the accusations leveled against Michael Jackson? No, but we have seen time and time again the inference that no Roman Catholic priest is to be trusted with young boys because of the few who have gone astray.

We cannot become so numb that only the hate speech of spokesmen for the Nation of Islam or the actions of a Sinead O'Connor incite us to react. Nor should we become so ultra-sensitive that we allow nothing to pass without criticism. A balance must be found, a balance between extremism and complacency. It is possible to be both combative and responsible. We wage battle not against one single incident, one criticism, one issue. We are fighting a long uphill fight to change the mindset of society, so that no longer will we – and most especially, the Church – be the object of one of the last acceptable forms of prejudice.

-Karen Lynn Krugh