

ASSESSING THE COVINGTON CATHOLIC CRITICS

Catholic League president Bill Donohue comments on critics of the Covington Catholic High School students involved in the fracas on January 18:

Having addressed the events of January 18 (click [here](#)), I now want to assess some of the most prominent critics of the Covington Catholic students. That the students were not the guilty party in the dustup is obvious to every fair-minded person who has seen, or learned about, the second video.

I did not issue a statement on this incident before today, and for good reason: the Catholic League defends wrongdoing committed against individual Catholics and the institutional Church; it does not defend wrongdoing done by either.

Those who weighed in on this story include some members of the Catholic clergy, Catholic lay leaders, and non-Catholics. Some were temperate in their remarks and some were vicious. Some have issued a full-throated apology, while others have offered less than a complete apology. Others are sticking to their guns. Two persons went off the cliff.

Erik Abriss was fired after he wished the students and their parents were dead. "I just want these people to die. Simple as that. And their parents." The freelance writer for Vulture was terminated by INE Entertainment, a digital company. Comedian Kathy Griffin took second prize. She wants the students hunted down. "Names please. And stories from people who can identify them and vouch for their identity." No wonder the students have received death threats.

It does not please me to say that the most irresponsible voices in this controversy have come from the Catholic clergy.

On the day of the incident, the Diocese of Covington and Covington Catholic High School issued a joint statement saying, "We condemn the actions of the Covington Catholic High School students towards Nathan Phillips specifically, and Native Americans in general...We extend our deepest apologies to Mr. Phillips. This behavior is opposed to the Church's teachings on the dignity and respect for the human person." They promised to "take appropriate action, up to and including expulsion."

What should be condemned is what the Diocese and the school said on January 22. It said that a "third-party investigation" is planned regarding what happened between "Covington Catholic students, Elder Nathan Phillips and Black Hebrew Israelites." What part of the second video does it not find persuasive?

After condemning the students without knowing their side—they did not call for an investigation on Friday—they are now going to probe this "very serious matter that has already permanently altered the lives of many people." It sure has—the students have been damaged. Sadly, the Diocese and the school have played a major part in this tragedy.

Three of the most pro-LGBT priests in the nation slammed the students. Father James Martin ripped the students for "sham[ing] and disrespect[ing] a man at the Indigenous People's March," saying that what they did was "not Catholic, not Christian and not acceptable."

Martin later said, "I would like to apologize to them for my judgment of them." He elaborates by saying that "we may never know what was going on inside the hearts of the students." We certainly don't know what they were thinking, and that is because the student at the center of the standoff, Nick Sandmann, never opened his mouth. Phillips was the one who walked over to the student and taunted him with his drum.

It is important to note that we have a very clear

understanding of what was on the minds of the black Israelites—they bashed whites, blacks, Hispanics, and gays. One might have thought that the gay bashing would have gotten Martin's back up, but apparently he was unfazed by it. He did not help himself by saying, "despite repeated viewings of all the videos, and reading all the participants' statements, these actions remain unclear." He does not disclose the source of his confusion.

Father Dan Horan, a Franciscan, went off the deep end. "I'm so deeply appalled and disgusted by the racist, shameful, disrespectful behavior of the Catholic high school students wearing MAGA ("Make America Great Again") hats and harassing a Native American elder and Vietnam Vet. I'm so angry and yet not at all surprised at pervasive white supremacy exhibited."

I am appalled and disgusted that a priest would make such a totally unfounded condemnation of these Catholic students. He even admits in a later tweet that "even if a third party provoked, it doesn't justify their behavior." There it is. Even if the students didn't provoke anything—and we know they did not—they are still guilty.

Father Edward Beck is a Passionist priest with a passion for liberal-left causes. The second video had zero effect on him. He said his "feelings" are "unchanged," saying the "boys should not have been permitted to wear MAGA hats if they were representing the school." Would Beck have objected if the students were wearing a pro-Hillary hat? Not on your life.

Among Catholic laypersons, no one did a better job of apologizing, without qualification, than Princeton's Robert George and *First Thing's* Matthew Schmitz. Robbie said, "I apologize to the Covington Catholic boys." He added, "I jumped the gun and that was stupid and unjust. It is I, not the boys, who needs to take a lesson from this." Hard to beat that.

Matt Schmitz was also excellent. "It's easy to find fault in

others, difficult to admit our own. For what it's worth, I believe that the boys acted in a more moral and Christian manner than those who condemned them and then refused to admit the error." Honest and thoughtful.

Sobrab Ahmari, a convert to Catholicism and op-ed editor of the *New York Post*, made a commendable statement to the students. "I also failed you. I rebuked you, though more mildly than others did, because I too can sometimes be credulous in the face of a media consensus; lesson learned." Well said.

Jeannie Mancini, who leads the March for Life, dived into this mess with both feet by condemning the students for their "reprehensible behavior." Now that she has had time to reconsider her remarks, she refuses to do so. But she did find time to delete her accusatory tweet.

Talking-head Hugh Hewitt has also taken down his offensive tweet about the students. He lectured the students on their need for "respect, forgiveness, courtesy." It is he who needs to do so, beginning with an apology to the students whom he has maligned.

CNN's Kirsten Powers is looking more foolish by the minute indicting the students for their "white privilege," a subject that she should know very well. She owns it.

Among non-Catholics, Rod Dreher began walking back two of his harsh tweets, though without offering an apology. But he mostly took the side of the students, noting how irresponsible the media have been. He took them to task for "conveniently ignor[ing] the provocative, racist, foul-mouthed attacks on the boys by one of Phillips's Native American companions." Exactly.

National Review has been on both sides of this issue. Rich Lowry criticized the boys but then took down his tweet. He also took down the incendiary tweet by his colleague, Nick

Frankovich. "The Covington Students Might as Well Have Just Spit on the Cross. They mock a serious frail-looking older man and gloat in their momentary role as Roman soldiers to his Christ."

With a comment like that, it is clear that Lowry has a loose cannon on his hands. A more recent article by Kyle Smith, which was quite good, was posted on the website of the magazine, suggesting that Lowry got the message.

New York Times columnist David Brooks has a mostly fair take on the controversy in the paper's January 22 edition, but it is marred by one key omission. He admits that "The Covington case was such a blatant rush to judgment—it was powered by crude prejudice and social stereotyping—I'm hoping it will be an important pivot point." It would have been helpful had he said that it was Catholic males who were the victims of prejudice and stereotyping. It would have been even better had he told the readers that his first statement on this issue was to criticize the boys.

Author Reza Aslan seemed to invite violence against Sandmann by saying he never saw a more "punchable face" than his. Aslan has taken down his vile tweet though he leaves up some despicable comments he found worthy of retweeting.

Bill Kristol, who has finally found a home with the Never Trumpers at CNN, blasted the students and then took down his tweets. What a class act. He offered no apology.

Howard Dean said he wants the school to close because it is a "hate factory." He has offered no retraction or an apology for his jackass remarks.

The Catholic League fights anti-Catholicism and, like every organization, we make mistakes as well. But when we do we own up, which is why I am not at the least bit bothered by those who have apologized to the students. For them, it's over, at least as far as I am concerned.

Why did some really good people make a mistake? I contacted Robbie George about this, and he was frank as always. When he saw the first video clip, it looked like the students were taunting the Native American man. A staunch pro-life intellectual, he said, "I was extremely concerned about how such behavior could give our great movement a bad name. So, much too hastily I issued a condemnation. When I saw the full video the next day, I realized I had been misled by the short clip. I immediately apologized, no ifs, ands, or buts."

Robbie did exactly that and his reasoning was sound.

What accounts for the most hateful comments? As someone who fights anti-Catholicism, it would be tempting to conclude that it is old-fashioned anti-Catholic bigotry. This is certainly true of the Indians—they tried to crash a Mass on Saturday—and of the black thugs who attacked virtually everyone, but it does not explain everything.

Surely the Diocese of Covington and the school are not driven by bigotry, so what explains their lame response? Their statement focuses much on Native Americans. It is sad but true that there are some in the Catholic Church today who are more sensitive to the rights of minorities than they are their own people. This is Exhibit A.

What else is in play? Politics. The politics of hate, made manifest in the delirious hatred of President Trump. It is the pro-Trump hat—cited by many—that drove them over the top. They need help.

Will anything be learned from this? For some, the answer is yes, but regrettably such persons are likely to be in a minority.