

BERNARDIN VINDICATED

By William A. Donohue

When news reports surfaced last November voicing the charges of Steven Cook against Cardinal Bernardin, we were more than skeptical. Here was a former mental patient and admitted addict of alcohol, sex and drugs, making serious charges of sexual misconduct against a well-respected Cardinal.

Worse, Cook, who is dying of AIDS, stated then that his charge was based on a "seeing and feeling memory," one that he had repressed for 17 years. With the help of a hypnotist, Cook said he was able to recover his memory. However, he now acknowledges that he can no longer trust his memory and has thus dropped the charges.

In the December edition of this publication, the lead story featured the official response of the Catholic League to the alleged incidents. Immediately following Cook's unsubstantiated allegation, we stated that "The charge recently made by Steven Cook against Cardinal Bernardin is a textbook case of how easy it is to smear someone's reputation." In addition, we took issue with the media: "Now one would think that when journalists are given stories right out of the Twilight Zone that doubt might conquer their temptation for a scoop."

There were some who advised us that it was wrong for the Catholic League to come to the defense of Cardinal Bernardin. Shame on them. Would they have waited to see what the jury said before they came to the defense of someone in their family? Would they have adopted a neutral stand if someone whom they loved and trusted had his character assailed by a depraved individual? The time to come to bat for loved ones is not after the evidence is in, it's when the reckless allegations are being made that support is needed. Sure, it

makes sense for the law to pursue a criminal charge, but even there, the accused is assumed to be innocent until proven guilty. Why should Cardinal Bernardin have been treated any differently?

What is really galling about the entire controversy is the extent to which therapists and lawyers associated with the recovered memory industry have been able to peddle their trash to an unsophisticated public. Owing to the likes of Donahue, Oprah, Geraldo and Sally Jesse, embittered men, women and children are making the rounds with the talk show gurus giving air to wild charges that have been induced through bogus means. This isn't science at work, it's burlesque.

Indeed any self-respecting social scientist who has studied the issue will inform that the recovered memory industry is one of the greatest hoaxes of the day. Those wanting good documentation on this fraud should read the March/April 1993 piece by Ofshe and Watters in *Society* (the article appeared months before Cook made his charges).

On a related issue, why didn't the media give as much exposure to Cook's retraction as they did to his allegations? To be fair, some did. But others, like the *New York Times*, did not. It is true that when the allegations were made against Cardinal Bernardin, the *New York Times* did not give it immediate and expanded coverage. But when Cardinal Bernardin called a press conference to explain his position, the *Times* provided coverage and followed through with other stories on the controversy. Fine. However, when Cook pulled his lawsuit, the *Times* gave the story only three inches of space, dropping the note at the bottom of page 20. Fairness would seem to dictate that when a public person such as Cardinal Bernardin has had his name maligned in the press that news reporting of a retraction would merit even more coverage than the allegations. But fairness is not something that the *New York Times* is known for these days.

The whole story was sordid from the beginning. We only hope that those who were so eager to believe the worst about Cardinal Bernardin are now just as eager to ask themselves why.