

# BIASED REPORTING ON 20/20

ABC's 20/20 on October 25 used loaded language to describe a series of adoptions in Ireland over a thirty year period which separated unwed mothers and their babies. Whatever the shortcomings of the plan, the various commentators on the program made it clear that they believed the Catholic Church was culpable.

In the preview at the beginning of the show the voice-over said: "Tonight a revelation that shocked a nation. The Catholic Church and a cold-hearted plan. Babies—thousands of them taken from their mothers' arms. Shipped across the sea for adoption in America." Images shown included that of a statue of the Virgin Mary and stained glass windows. The voice-over continued, "They were young mothers, unwed, judged, at the mercy of the Church." Finally, "Tom Jarriel in a 20/20 classic, the story of a very different time, a powerful Church, desperate young women, and a heartless act in the name of God."

Hugh Downs helped introduce the story, calling what happened a "heartless plan" which involved "one of the most powerful organizations in the world—the Catholic Church." He elaborated, "It's the story of young women who broke the rules of their Church and their society and paid a cruel price." Then Barbara Walters added, "They were unwed mothers, judged and ostracized, forced to turn to the Catholic Church for help. What happened to them as a result may now seem beyond comprehension."

Tom Jarriel was the reporter. He used phrases like "shameful deeds of honorable men" and "merciful Church showing no mercy." Stained glass windows were shown during the voice-over. He discussed the "displacement of a generation of children through the intimidation of their mothers." He explained that to be unwed and pregnant involved a "social

stigma [which] was enormous....the Catholic Church branded them as sinners." They had to go to Church-supported homes and give up the baby.

The Irish government "surrendered its responsibility to the Church." From the 1940s to the 1970s adoptions of this secretive nature involved about 2000 children. Guidelines for the adoption were recently found. Among the provisions were that "only Catholic couples could adopt" and that children must be raised Catholic. The highest ranking Irish Catholic official said at the time that it was important to have no publicity.

A priest was shown as spokesman for the Church. He argued that one cannot fairly judge a policy implemented in the 1940s by the standard of 1996. But Jarriel did not agree, choosing instead to take a more accusatory stance.

The Catholic League does not object to straight reporting that has the effect of embarrassing the Church. It does object to tendentiously conceived and executed reports that wrench out of historical context episodes in the Church's history. It is for this reason that we conveyed our objections to ABC.