

BIGOTED GEORGIA TEACHER GETS OFF SCOT-FREE

Exposing acts of anti-Catholic bigotry is, of course, our specialty at the Catholic League. We blow the whistle on those responsible, be they the perpetrators or the enablers.

On Ash Wednesday, February 21, the perpetrator was a substitute teacher at a public high school in Georgia. The enabler? The local board of education superintendent, who pooh-poohed the teacher's outrageous actions as nothing more than "an honest error in judgment."

A substitute teacher at White County High School in Cleveland, Georgia walked up to a 17-year-old Catholic student seated in class and, without saying a word, wiped the girl's Ash Wednesday ashes off her forehead.

The teacher then made matters even worse when some of the girl's classmates protested; she responded by berating the girl in front of the entire class and making patently untrue and derisive statements about Catholicism. The girl's parents informed the Catholic League about this incident two days later.

On March 5, Bill Donohue wrote to Paul Shaw, superintendent of the White County Board of Education, wanting to know what disciplinary measures would be taken against the teacher. Shaw's reply to Donohue was, to put it mildly, inadequate.

In his letter of March 21, Shaw said, "I am aware of the incident and believe the principal resolved the matter in an appropriate manner. He has met with [the girl] and her father to hear concerns. The employee made an honest error in judgment and has been appropriately counseled and cautioned and I believe a similar incident will not be repeated."

Bill Donohue responded on March 27 by contacting Kathy Cox, the State Superintendent of Schools in Georgia, asking her to investigate the matter.

Donohue deemed Shaw's response "totally unsatisfactory" and called to Cox's attention Georgia's Code of Ethics for Educators (505-6-.01), which has a section on "Abuse of Students." The Code says that unethical conduct includes "engaging in harassing behavior on the basis of race, gender, sex, national origin, religion or disability."

We were then referred to the Georgia Professional Standards Commission because, under Georgia state law, Superintendent Cox does not have the power to launch an investigation into the actions of a county superintendent such as Shaw. On April 3 Bill Donohue wrote to Dr. Gary Walker, director of the Standards Commission's Ethics Department. Dr. Walker followed through, but at press time the situation remained unsatisfactory.

Meanwhile, we learned that the offending substitute teacher had been dismissed by the White County school board—but for reasons having nothing to do with the Ash Wednesday incident. She was apparently let go, according to the offended girl's parents, for not showing up to teach classes that she had agreed to cover.

"The real issue here is not the teacher, rather it is Dr. Shaw," Bill Donohue said at that point. "For him to say that a teacher in his employ made 'an honest error in judgment' by wiping ashes off the forehead of a Catholic student on Ash Wednesday—and then berated her in front of her classmates—is beyond lame. It's morally reprehensible."

All of this makes us wonder: if the teacher had berated a Muslim student during Ramadan, would the White County school authorities treat it as a serious matter? Or would they simply dismiss it as "an honest error in judgment"?