

# BILL O'REILLY GETS IN OVER HIS HEAD

Many people admire Bill O'Reilly for his aggressive style and his emphasis on "no-spin" reporting. He delights in being a contrarian. It is also well known that O'Reilly is a Catholic, and in discussions of Catholicism he often gets in over his head, as he does while opining on other subjects. Lately O'Reilly has picked up the pace on his criticism of the Church; many members of the league have complained, and we have been monitoring the situation.

Initially, O'Reilly lashed out but covered himself, often by distancing himself from his commentary or by withdrawing some of his barbs. For example, the following remarks are excerpted from the March 5 broadcast of the "Radio Factor" on Westwood 1. O'Reilly criticized the Church for its stance on the conflict with Iraq, and attempted to discredit the Church's position by referring to the recent sex abuse crisis. While we have taken issue with such tactics before, O'Reilly was quick to soften the blow of one statement by lamenting the fact: "The Catholic Church in America has no question lost its moral authority. And that is, I hate to say it, that is the truth." In addition, he put criticism of the Church in other people's mouths: "So, you know, people who aren't Catholic are saying, well, you know, 'Look—you're letting little kids get brutalized, and you're not doing anything about it. Why should we listen to you about anything?'" And again, he toned down the comment by noting his own regret: "And that's unfortunately the prevailing wisdom."

O'Reilly was quick to point out that his point of view is not that of someone outside the Church: "Now the day of prayer and fasting on Ash Wednesday, I'm for that." He quotes from the Catechism and cites it as a valid source of guidance. But he tried to refute the pope's position by comparing it to that of

Pope Pius XII, what he called a “very eerie parallel.” Although he claimed to have “investigated this fairly extensively,” his history was not quite accurate. O’Reilly said that the Vatican “at that time basically didn’t do anything either.... And so the pope at that time came under a tremendous amount of criticism for basically allowing Hitler to basically be aggressive without the Catholic Church taking a stand against the Third Reich.”

Catholic League members know that this is a canard, and O’Reilly backed down from his statement a moment later, admitting that the pope “did criticize Hitler; it’s on the record.” O’Reilly offered further defense of Pius XII’s position: “If Pope Pius had done anything aggressive, Mussolini would have shut him down.” And he admitted that Pius XII did good work during the war, for instance, by providing safe houses for refugees.

Speaking on the current pope, he blurted out, “I have never liked this pope. I have always felt he was an autocrat who had no vision about how people live in the real world”; but he quickly noted that John Paul II “survived the Nazis,” and later stated self-deprecatingly, “I couldn’t really even clean the restroom of the pope.”

O’Reilly often overshot his mark, only to cover himself by semi-retractions; he could then point to his moderating comments when people criticize his more uncontrolled statements. His very deliberate style is frustrating. This is not to say that O’Reilly is free from blame; his “no-spin zone” doesn’t always live up to the name.

The final straw came on the March 15 broadcast of the Fox News Network’s “The O’Reilly Factor.” O’Reilly criticized Pope John Paul II for not having “a position on Saddam [Hussein].” After commenting on the brutality of Saddam Hussein’s regime, O’Reilly said, “And then the pope sits in Rome and says, gee, this is terrible, but does not throw his moral authority

behind removing this dictator." At this point the league could no longer ignore O'Reilly's rhetoric and so issued the following news release:

"Bill O'Reilly has made no secret about his contempt for Pope John Paul II. On his radio show on March 5 he explicitly said, 'I have never liked this pope. I have always felt he was an autocrat who had no vision about how people live in the real world.' Now he is implying that the Holy Father is giving a wink and a nod to Saddam Hussein.

"O'Reilly's ramblings about the pope do not make him an anti-Catholic. But it does make him an ignoramus. The pope does not have a 'position' on Saddam Hussein anymore than he has one on George W. Bush. But he does have a position on the culture of death and all that it represents. Indeed, there is no one in the world who has more forthrightly addressed issues like genocide, torture, abortion and the like than Pope John Paul II. For O'Reilly to suggest that the pope is soft on Saddam is scurrilous.

"Just last Saturday Fidel Castro presided over the inauguration of a new convent of nuns in Cuba. He did so as a fitting tribute to the fifth anniversary of Pope John Paul II's visit to Cuba. Now it will no doubt come as a tremendous shock to Bill O'Reilly to learn that the pope was able to accomplish this without ever having a position on Fidel Castro. Come to think of it, the pope never had a position on any of the Soviet Union's officials, yet even Gorbachev credited the Holy Father with bringing about the implosion of the U.S.S.R.

"It's time O'Reilly took a deep breath and stopped with the hyperbole. It's also time he learned a little more about his own religion."