

# CAN A PRIEST BE HOUSE CHAPLAIN AGAIN?

Catholic League president Bill Donohue comments on the controversy over the House Chaplain:

The resignation of Father Pat Conroy as House Chaplain came after he met with Rep. Paul Ryan, a Catholic Republican, two weeks ago; the priest says Ryan asked him to resign. It appears that Ryan felt Father Conroy was getting too political in his job. According to Rep. Gerry Connolly, a Catholic Democrat, "For a lot of members, the outrage is personal, and it's not about Catholicism."

That being the case, I saw no role for the Catholic League: anti-Catholicism had nothing to do with this controversy. But now things have changed.

Rep. Mark Walker, an ordained Baptist minister and a Republican, said he hopes the new House Chaplain will be somebody who "has adult children" who can "connect with the bulk of the body here." That obviously would preclude most Catholic priests since only a few are married. The congressman is now walking back his remark, saying he meant to say that whoever fills this post should "have experience in dealing with family issues."

This would not be a big issue if there were no history of anti-Catholicism among some Protestant congressmen. But there is.

In 1999-2000, I got into a protracted fight with House Republicans when Father Timothy O'Brien, who was being considered for the post of House Chaplain, became the victim of a vicious smear campaign launched by some evangelicals; he would have been the first Catholic to assume the duties as House Chaplain. He was rejected by the House leadership though

the issue remained unresolved.

The bullying of the Catholic League by some Republicans, led by House Speaker Dennis Hastert and House Majority Leader Dick Armey, was relentless. But we fought back and they lost. On March 23, 2000, Father Daniel P. Coughlin was named the first Catholic to become House Chaplain.

Rep. Connolly is rightly upset with Rep. Walker's remark, branding it "anti-Catholic," but the former seminarian carries his own baggage into this debate.

In 2008, when Connolly was running for a congressional seat in Virginia, which he ultimately won, he was opposed by Keith Fimian, a Republican. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) accused Fimian of "rolling back women's rights." It cited as evidence that Fimian was a member of Legatus, an organization of Catholic CEOs.

This was a hit job. Legatus is an excellent Catholic organization founded and run by Tom Monaghan, who started Domino's Pizza. It has plenty of women members and zero history of misogyny.

When this unseemly attack on Fimian occurred, I said that although Connolly was not responsible for the DCCC smear, he was the clear beneficiary of it, and should therefore "tell the DCCC to cease and desist with the Catholic bashing immediately." He never did.

There is no role for anti-Catholicism in politics. This means that no priest should ever be disqualified for the House Chaplain position because he is celibate. It must also be said that there is no role for hypocrisy in dealing with such matters.