

POPE FRANCIS DIES AT 88; LEGACY WAS MIXED

The death of Pope Francis on Easter Monday caught many as a surprise, though not as a shock. He definitely rebounded from the time he was hospitalized, but he never regained his normal stature.

Pope Francis was treated far more kindly by the media than his predecessors. That's because he was seen as a champion of social justice and an ardent foe of inequality. He was also seen as an agent of change.

By contrast, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope John Paul II were traditionalists; they spoke more to the moral issues that plagued the West.

It appeared that the pope would have liked to have made more changes, especially with regard to the Church's teachings on sexuality. He made that apparent by the appointments he made of cardinals to senior positions. But he also knew his authority was limited by Scripture and tradition.

While Pope Francis was not an admirer of President Trump, stylistically they had much in common. Speaking from the heart, and off-the-cuff, are refreshing attributes, especially among elites, but they can also be a source of trouble. After the pope traveled abroad, he gave interviews on the papal plane that were so blunt that his spokesmen often had to walk back what he said. Trump's casual style can also be a problem.

In the pope's waning days, he drew parallels with President Biden. Francis was mentally astute but in failing health; Biden was cognitively challenged. In both cases, it was not clear who was in charge of the store. This is a condition that is rife for mischief.

Attention will now turn to the pope's successor. Pope Francis appointed most of the cardinals who will make that choice. This suggests that someone closer to his vision of the Church will be chosen. On the other hand, he has chosen men from the hinterland, from far away places where a penchant for orthodoxy, not change, is commonplace. This suggests that the new pope may be more of a traditionalist.

It does seem likely that whoever is chosen will have to bring about more clarity than we have been accustomed to under Pope Francis. Quite frankly, the Holy Father often made pronouncements that fostered confusion. The time has come to promote a more coherent vision; this will require a gentle push of the pendulum back to the middle.

If the cardinals decide to choose someone who is a traditionalist, they can do no better than to look to Africa. It is home to the most brilliant orthodox clergy in the world. If the cardinals want to choose someone more like Francis, they will look to Europe.

JUSTIFYING BIGOTRY

Look who's against fighting anti-Christian bias? An organized group of left-wing *religious* activists.

The Interfaith Alliance is a hodgepodge of left-wing activists, spread across a variety of religions. They are furious with President Trump's directive to U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi setting up a task force to root out anti-Christian bias in the federal government; we are assisting her in that effort.

Why would a group of professed religious people be against

efforts to combat anti-Christian bias? Indeed, this is the only bias they appear to be okay with. To be exact, they deny it even exists. They say, “There is no evidence of widespread anti-Christian bias in the United States.”

If that were the case, the Catholic League would not exist. We don't create bigotry, we respond to it. But in the minds of those affiliated with the Interfaith Alliance, the fact that we fight anti-Christian deeds means *we are a threat to liberty*.

They claim that efforts to oppose anti-Christian bigotry will “legitimize discrimination against marginalized groups like the LGBTQ community, infringe on our reproductive freedom, and hurt our society's most vulnerable.”

In other words, those who object to “Drag Queen Story Hours” for children, and those who oppose genital mutilation for minors, are the problem. Ditto for those who oppose child abuse in the womb.

Ironically, the Interfaith Alliance's opposition to fighting anti-Christian bigotry validates the reason why President Trump formalized efforts to combat it. We commend them for that.

DEFENDING PRIESTS' RIGHTS; AMICUS BRIEF FILED IN NJ

The Catholic League has filed an amicus brief in New Jersey defending the rights of priests. We are represented by the Pittsburgh office of Leech Tishman; our attorney is Russell Giancola. The lead attorneys for the case are from Cooper

Levenson in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

This case began almost seven years ago. Following the Pennsylvania grand jury report in 2018, the Attorney General in New Jersey, launched an investigation of the clergy who worked in the state's dioceses. Prosecutors wanted a grand jury empanelled but the Diocese of Camden objected, saying they had no authority to do so. It is the Camden Diocese that we are defending.

The Diocese of Camden is on solid grounds. In New Jersey, grand juries are established to investigate public agencies such as prisons and police departments. Targeting private individuals or private institutions are not permitted. Therefore, to go after the Catholic clergy—investigating alleged molestation of minors dating back to 1940—is unwarranted.

In May, 2023, Superior Court Judge Peter Warshaw took the side of the Camden Diocese. He said that state law allows special grand juries to investigate public officials or government agencies, not a private entity like the Catholic Church or individual priests. He also questioned the fairness of the probe: the accused priests will not be given a chance to defend themselves. Judge Warshaw said this amounts to a “hit-and-run.”

Subsequently, the New Jersey Supreme Court ordered the records unsealed and agreed to hear arguments in the case in April. This means our lawyers must act with dispatch.

A grand jury allows no cross examination so the accused have no legal recourse when their names are bandied about in the media. This is outrageous, and it is doubly outrageous when we note that, as always, it is the Catholic Church that is being targeted. It is never some other religion and it sure isn't the public schools, the source of sexual abuse today.

On a related note, we have complained for decades about the

decision made by dioceses in the United States that post the names of accused priests on the internet or in some other public spot. No other institution does this—just the Catholic Church. But in March, Pope Francis formally rejected this practice. Henceforth, dioceses are discouraged from publishing such a list.

Priests should have the same rights as every other American, but they do not. Due process demands that they are assumed innocent until proven guilty. Also, most of the bad apples are dead or are no longer in ministry. So this grand jury is a sham.

We will keep you posted.

SATANISTS STRIKE AGAIN

In March, a Kansas-based group, The Satanic Grotto, announced that it was planning to hold a “Black Mass” on grounds surrounding the Kansas State Capitol in Topeka at the end of the month.

The Satanic Grotto admitted that the purpose of the “Black Mass” is to engage in blasphemy targeted at Catholics. On Facebook, it said, “We will be performing rites to the Black Mass and indulging in sacrilegious blaspheme [sic].”

We contacted the governor and the entire Kansas legislature, advising a course of action.

While it is true that blasphemy is generally seen as protected speech under the First Amendment, in *Lynch v. Donnelly* (1984), Chief Justice Warren Burger explicitly said that the Constitution “affirmatively mandates accommodation, not merely

tolerance, of all religions, and *forbids hostility to all* (our italics).”

Every Christmas season, the Catholic League receives a permit to display a nativity scene in Central Park. Central Park, unlike property near City Hall, is considered a public forum, a place where freedom of expression carries no appearance of government endorsement.

Ergo, for the government of Kansas to allow an event on the grounds of the statehouse—the express purpose of which is to insult Catholics—might give the impression that it is endorsing this sacrilege. It would therefore be party to the kind of “hostility” to religion that the Supreme Court said was unconstitutional.

We suggested that an alternative site be chosen.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AFFIRMED; ANTI-CHRISTIAN BIAS TO END

On February 6, President Donald Trump announced that he is forming a new Presidential Commission on Religious Liberty. To accomplish this goal, he appointed Attorney General Pam Bondi to chair a task force to “eradicate anti-Christian bias.”

“The mission of this task force will be to immediately halt all forms of anti-Christian targeting and discrimination within the federal government,” Trump said.

Trump’s executive order was pointed. He accused the Biden administration of ignoring the violence, theft and arson against “Catholic churches, charities, and pro-life centers.”

He specifically cited the FBI's attack on "radical-traditionalist" Catholics; they were seen as a domestic threat.

"My Administration will not tolerate anti-Christian weaponization of government or unlawful conduct targeting Christians." Trump pulled no punches nailing his predecessor.

"The Biden Department of Education sought to repeal religious-liberty protections of faith-based organizations on college campuses. The Biden Equal Employment Opportunity Commission sought to force Christians to affirm radical transgender ideology against their faith. And the Biden Department of Health and Human Services sought to drive Christians who do not conform to certain beliefs on sexual orientation and gender ideology out of the foster-care system. The Biden team declared March 31, 2024—Easter Sunday—as 'Transgender Day of Visibility.'"

The task force will review the activities of all executive departments and agencies, seeking to purge any vestiges of bigotry against Christians. Information gleaned from this review will be widely shared; we will make good use of it. Periodic reports will be published and a final report will be given before the task force expires in two years.

Of great interest to us, the task force will "solicit information and ideas from a broad range of individuals and groups."

More than any other organization in the nation, the Catholic League has documented anti-Christian prejudice and discrimination. There are other Catholic advocacy organizations, but none has a website chock full of data on this issue that can even come close to what we have detailed.

As soon as the executive order was issued, we started collecting a huge amount of information. Indeed, there is not a single issue mentioned by Trump that we have not led the way

in combating. Our list of anti-Christian bias committed by the federal government is extensive.

The scourge of Christian bashing, which Catholics, in particular, have had to endure is astounding. While some Republicans have contributed to it, most of the attacks have come from the Democrats. We have the evidence and we will be happy to share it with the Trump administration.

POPE IS FAILING

When we went to press, Pope Francis was being hospitalized for double pneumonia and was not doing well. All scheduled events were cancelled. At 88, he appears to be failing.

He has long had respiratory problems. As a young man he had part of one lung removed due to an infection, leaving him susceptible to respiratory illnesses. More recently, he has appeared breathless in public.

Already there is wide speculation about his successor, but from what we learned when Pope Benedict XVI resigned, much of it is idle chatter. Those who will vote in the conclave are cardinals under the age of 80. There are 253 cardinals and 138 will partake in the voting process. Francis has appointed approximately 80 percent of them.

We looked at media reports on who was likely to succeed Benedict and only one credible source mentioned the eventual winner, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio. But even then, it was said that "His 'moment' seems to be over." Most Vatican observers mentioned Cardinal Angelo Scola as the most likely to succeed Benedict.

There are those Catholics who say we need to continue the legacy of Pope Francis and select another pope just like him. Others say we need to push the pendulum the other way, correcting the “progressive” drift that Francis espoused. Either way, there is only a limited amount of change that the Holy Father can deliver.

Our prayers are with the pope. We also pray for his successor.

CHRISTMAS BATTLE ENSUES; WE PREVAIL

In recent years the Christmas wars have subsided, though each year there are some ugly incidents. This year we got involved in what could have been a legal showdown, but ended mostly on our terms.

On December 12, we were contacted by a Catholic League member who sought to have a nativity scene displayed in the lobby of his cooperative building in Larchmont, New York, a town in Westchester.

The lobby had a Christmas tree and a menorah. His request was denied. When he was told that the nativity scene was a religious symbol and could not be displayed, he pointed out that the menorah was also a religious symbol. He was told they didn't see it that way.

That same day, Bill Donohue wrote a letter to the Property Manager, sending a copy to the president of the board of directors and a Catholic League attorney (see p. 4). The letter was sent priority mail, UPS, and was delivered by 10:00 a.m. on December 13.

They were given until December 17 to answer. We heard from their lawyers that day. The board of directors of the Coop decided to pull the Christmas tree and the menorah from the lobby, thus making the charge of religious discrimination moot.

There are three ways they could have ruled on this issue: allow the nativity scene; pull the menorah; or keep the menorah and prohibit the nativity scene. The first two options are declarations of neutrality, treating the Christian and the Jewish symbols equally. The latter would have triggered a lawsuit.

We hasten to add that the two neutral decisions are not morally equal. To allow both religious symbols would be an expression of tolerance. To deny both is an expression of intolerance. They chose the intolerant route.

They would rather deny Jews their rights before extending equal rights to Christians. Telling.

Atheist organizations and Satanic groups were busy in other parts of the country.

Atheists in Rhode Island tried to compete with a traditional Christmas display by featuring an array of silly secular symbols in the state capitol. A pagan ministry sought to march in a Christmas parade in Parkersburg, West Virginia, backed by an atheist group.

Satanists in Iowa hosted the "Satanic Holiday Joy at the Iowa State Capitol," and another band of Satanists installed a demonic idol in the plaza across from the New Hampshire state house in Concord.

These people are full of hate, which is the opposite of what Christmas is—a demonstration of love.

We were happy to have played a role in sending these folks a

message—Christians will not shy from defending themselves.

ABBOTT DID IT

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott's decision in March of 2021 to launch Operation Lone Star—bussing migrants from Texas to cities across the nation—turned out to be one of the most consequential issues affecting the 2024 presidential election. What he did was to turn a regional issue into a national one. That was a stroke of sociological genius.

Washington D.C. and New York City were targeted in the first wave, with bus after bus arriving in Union Station and Port Authority, respectively. Chicago and points west were next up.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis also played a vital role. His decision to fly migrants to Martha's Vineyard—home to wealthy supporters of President Biden's open border policy—hit a chord: The illegal aliens were moved out of the liberal paradise with dispatch.

Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey got into the act, bussing migrants to the nation's Capitol. All participants signed a waiver that their free trip was voluntary.

If these governors had not acted, there would have been little sympathy in most parts of the country for their plight. After all, the citizens in most states were never threatened by those who crashed our borders, so they had no reason to take this issue as seriously as those who were impacted.

Gov. Abbott did what he had to do—he had to shock the conscience of the nation. He sent a message to his critics: everyone needs to have some skin in the game.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY TRIUMPHS; SUPREME COURT NEXT UP

According to the *Washington Post*, Donald Trump won the Catholic vote 56 percent to 41 percent. That's a great triumph for religious liberty.

Exit polls showed that it wasn't abortion that hurt Kamala Harris the most with Catholics, it was other issues. Among them, surely, was her stand on religious liberty. Moreover, when a candidate loses the Catholic vote by 15 points, it is hard to win the White House.

In late October, Harris was asked by an NBC reporter if she would consider any concessions on abortion. The reporter, Hallie Jackson, specifically asked Harris if she would allow religious exemptions. No, she said—not even one. That's the voice of extremism.

Harris' extremism on religious liberty was also evident on the subject of transgenderism.

The issue of gender ideology is laden with religious overtones. Harris not only supports attempts by minors to change their sex behind the backs of their parents, she co-sponsored bills that would force Catholic doctors and hospitals to perform sex-reassignment surgery and abortions.

Then there is Harris' record of anti-Catholicism, something which we documented more than any other organization in the nation. It is extreme, and it is obviously a religious liberty issue.

The battle for religious liberty is not over. We need the

support of the courts.

Trump appointed Amy Coney Barrett, Brett Kavanaugh and Neil Gorsuch; the first two are Catholic and Gorsuch, who was raised Catholic, is Protestant. All are good on religious liberty. Chief Justice John Roberts, another Catholic, is mostly reliable on this issue. Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito, both staunch Catholics, are rock solid on this First Amendment right.

Thomas is 76. Alito is 74. Both have served with distinction. They are bright and courageous and have been subjected to incredible vitriol. Indeed, they have survived attempts to destroy them by the masters of personal destruction: those who work in the media, left-wing advocacy organizations, the entertainment industry, and education have worked overtime to smear them.

The Left failed to bring them down. Halleluiah. But early next year it will be time for them to step down. If Trump can appoint two more just like them—he can't do any better—he will secure a religious-friendly court for decades.

The most important right in a democracy is the free exercise of religion, which is encoded in the First Amendment. That right, and another First Amendment right—free speech—were targeted by Biden-Harris more than any administration in American history. But their days are numbered.

Our work is never done. But if we get more Supreme Court Justices that support religious liberty, that will be a big step forward.

CHRISTMAS BILLBOARD

Every year the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), a group of militant atheists—whose love for abortion is on a par with their love for Christian bashing—like to erect a silly Winter Solstice exhibit at the Capitol in Madison, Wisconsin. This year they are in for a surprise.

We have decided to send these activists a lesson, reminding them that the Christmas season is our season. We rule. They lose.

We will have a billboard displayed in the vicinity of Madison, Wisconsin from December 16 to December 29. It will be on the beltway, south of Mineral Point Road. The panel size is 12 x 50.

(We will feature a picture, or a facsimile of the billboard, in the next edition of *Catalyst*, but the wording can now be revealed.)

It is headlined, "ATHEISTS STRIKE OUT AT CHRISTMAS," we opine, "Celebrating Winter Solstice is a Child's Game." We remind them that "*This Is Our Season—Not Theirs*," and that it is meant to "Celebrate the Birth of Christ." We end by saying, "*Merry Christmas*."

We chose Madison because it is home to FFRF and we wanted them to see it. Call it our Christmas gift to them.

They put up their Winter Solstice display to compete with the manger scene; it is only apropos that we compete with them.

They filed a bogus complaint with the IRS against us in the fall, so this is our way of saying, "we're not going away."