

# **“MERRY CHRISTMAS” RETURNS; CULTURE WAR CONTINUES**

The culture war over Christmas got off to a flying start in November when Wal-Mart and other department stores said they would invoke “Merry Christmas” this year instead of the secular greeting “Happy Holidays.” Everyone credited the Catholic League with the turnaround, save, of course, for Bill O'Reilly who once again took credit for our win; that's why we call his show the “O'Shameless Factor.”

Last year we launched a boycott against Wal-Mart because of its discriminatory practice of treating Hanukkah and Kwanzaa with respect, while showing nothing but disrespect for Christmas. Not only was Christmas not acknowledged on Wal-Mart's website, a statement about its alleged pagan roots was promoted by an employee and was then defended by its top public relations officer. We sought an apology, a withdrawal of the offensive statement and a revision on its website. All three demands were met within 48 hours of announcing the boycott; it mattered to Wal-Mart that we had contacted 126 religious organizations across seven faith communities to join us.

Others stores have gotten the message as well. Macy's, Kmart, Kohl's and Target are emphasizing Christmas this year. Last year, we initially had a problem with Lands' End because of its “Holiday” promotions; this year it has both “Holiday” and Christmas catalogues. Customers at Sam's Club and Wal-Mart are being greeted with “Merry Christmas,” and in many stores Christmas carols are being piped in for shoppers to enjoy. According to one report, there is a 60 percent increase in seasonal “Holiday” merchandise being renamed “Christmas.” We know of only one store, Best Buy, that still refuses to acknowledge Christmas.

While this is encouraging, the same old fight is going on in the schools, the workplace and in parks; a particularly vicious assault on Christmas was found on a prominent atheist website (see p. 12). So the Catholic League is not ready to declare victory.

We are working this Christmas season in tandem with Father Benedict Groeschel, C.F.R. on a "Christmas Watch" program (see p. 2). In addition, on November 28 we hit the pages of the *New York Times* with our provocative ad on celebrating Christmas and diversity (see p. 13).

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## POPE VISITS TURKEY

Pope Benedict XVI got a bad rap in September from those who tried to paint his speech in Germany as anti-Islam. That is why his trip to Turkey, a mostly Muslim nation that is nominally secular, is so historic. To be sure, the pope has grave reservations about the readiness of Turkey to join the European Union, but he is not a foe of any world religion.

One of the cardinal precepts of a free and democratic nation is respect for religious freedom, and on this score Turkey fails. The Catholic Church is forbidden by law to operate a seminary or publish religious literature. Worse, many Christians live in fear for their lives.

Conditions are so bad that upwards of 100,000 Christians have left Turkey in the past few years. Of those who remain, most are afraid to go to Mass on Sunday. As reported in the *New York Times* in October, "Over the past three and a half years, Christians have been subjected to a steady stream of church bombings, assassinations, kidnappings and threatening letters slipped under their doors."

What this represents is incredible intolerance for the “infidel,” the pernicious name applied to non-Muslims. It’s no wonder Christian women wear Muslim head scarves to avoid intimidation at the hands of Muslim zealots trying to impose a rigid Islamic dress code.

The pope’s courage makes him a role model for the leaders of all nations.

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## **POPE SPARKS MUSLIM BACKLASH; VITRIOL AND VIOLENCE ENSUES**

When Pope Benedict XVI gave his scholarly address before a learned audience at Regensburg University, he had no idea it would lead to a massive uproar among so many Muslims. Ever since giving his September 12 address, the pope has been bombarded with criticism, much of it patently unfair.

In the course of his lengthy remarks, Pope Benedict cited a 14th century Byzantine emperor: “Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.”

The pope made it clear that these were not his words, and that he was using them only to highlight what has often happened in history when faith and reason are uncoupled. But it was to no avail: his most strident critics ripped his words out of context and vilified him.

In response, many Muslims erupted in violence. In Somalia, Muslims were urged by a cleric to “hunt down” the pope and kill him. “Whoever offends our Prophet Muhammad should be

killed on the spot by the nearest Muslim,” said Sheik Abubakar Hassan Malin. His violent words bequeathed violence when a nun was shot outside a children’s hospital in the nation’s capital. Not to be outdone, a senior Turkish official compared the pope to Hitler.

The Mujahideen Shura Council referred to the pope as “the worshipper of the cross,” and pledged to “break the cross and spill the wine” in the “house of the dog from Rome.” The group, which posted its call to violence on the Internet, also said that God will enable Muslims “to slit their throats, and make their money and descendants the bounty of the mujahideen.” Seven churches were firebombed in the West Bank and Gaza by gun-wielding Palestinians, using lighter fluid to burn the churches. And in many parts of the world, Muslims took to the streets chanting “Death to the Pope,” burning him in effigy.

The Muslim uproar did not die down quickly and is likely to reappear when the pope ventures to Turkey on November 28. Those who have been highly critical of Pope Benedict also include many non-Muslims, as well as devout secularists. He has also been lambasted by ex-Catholics like Rosie O’Donnell, and has been the subject of much abuse by pundits in the media. The Catholic League, of course, defended him non-stop.

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## NBC YIELDS

NBC announced on October 19 that it would cut the “Mock Crucifixion” segment from its November 22 airing of Madonna’s “Confessions” concert.

NBC did the right thing, but the fact that it did not say why the offensive part of Madonna’s concert was cut showed

cowardice. What NBC should have done is to admit that since it refused to air the Danish cartoons that Muslims objected to earlier in the year, it felt obliged not to treat Christians in a discriminatory manner. On September 20, Bill Donohue wrote to NBC chief Bob Wright making this point.

Pressure politics were at work, too. On September 29, another letter was sent to Bob Wright by Brent Bozell, president of the Parents Television Council, and Donohue, warning him that they would organize a boycott of one of the sponsors of the Madonna concert if the "Mock Crucifixion" part were not excised; a decision would be made via a conference call the following day on which sponsor would receive their Christmas present. In addition to the Catholic League and the Parents Television Council, the following groups said they would join the boycott: American Family Association, Morley Institute, Christian Film and Television Commission, Jews Against Anti-Christian Defamation, Traditional Values Coalition and Women Influencing the Nation.

This is a great victory, one that all our members should relish. To beat both NBC and Madonna is no small feat.

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## **CRECHE CASE MAY GET HEARD**

The Thomas More Law Center, representing a Catholic League parent and her two minor children, has asked the U.S. Supreme Court to review a case that allows New York City to ban nativity scenes in public schools; the schools allow the Jewish menorah and Islamic star and crescent.

This case already has been before the federal district court and the court of appeals. Despite the fact that our side has

twice lost, Bill Donohue is not discouraged. It has been his goal all along to get the U.S. Supreme Court to rule definitively on this matter, one way or the other. However, it is critical that the high court accept this case; otherwise the circuit court decision stands.

At stake is government sanctioned religious discrimination. The brief filed by the Thomas More Law Center cites a 1982 case wherein the Supreme Court ruled that "The clearest command of the Establishment Clause is that one religious denomination cannot be officially preferred over another." And that is what New York City has done: by allowing some religious symbols and disallowing others, it has shown preferential treatment.

Richard Thompson, president of the Thomas More Law Center, and Robert Muise, the trial attorney handling this case, are eminently qualified to pursue this matter. The Catholic League was only too happy to secure a Catholic League member, Andrea Sokoros, to test this outrageous policy in the courts.

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## **UVA STUDENT NEWSPAPER ASSAILS JESUS AND VIRGIN MARY**

No sooner had the new school year begun than the Catholic League was drawn into a battle with the University of Virginia (UVA).

Catholic students on the campus contacted us about two anti-Christian cartoons that appeared in *The Cavalier Daily*, the student newspaper on campus. The August 23 edition showed a drawing of Jesus crucified on a mathematical graph with the inscription, "Christ on a Cartesian Coordinate Plane." On

August 24, the newspaper ran a cartoon of Mary and Joseph, with Mary holding baby Jesus. "Mary...I don't mean to ruin this special moment," Joseph says, "but how did you get that bumpy rash?" To which Mary says, "I swear, it was Immaculately Transmitted."

We requested an apology, citing precedent: In November 2005, the newspaper apologized to homosexuals for publishing a cartoon that described a crane as the "gayest-looking of all birds." Michael Slaven, the editor-in-chief of the newspaper, replied to our request: "Under our newspaper's policies, satire of religion, or any other belief or creed, is acceptable."

Our response was predictably strong. Here is what we told the media: "When gays were offended at the University of Virginia for some throw-away line, *The Cavalier Daily* said it 'regrets printing this comic and deeply apologizes to those who were offended.' Yet when it comes to Christians, not even a shallow apology can be mustered. So it can be implied that the Mother of Jesus has a sexually transmitted disease—and that's okay with the editors—but making flip comments about homosexuals is unacceptable."

Kiera McCaffrey, the league's director of communications, was quoted in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* saying, "We're calling them out on it. They're mocking the crucified Jesus and there's an insinuation of a sexually transmitted disease."

The response that our news release garnered caught the student newspaper by surprise. Both *The Cavalier Daily* and *The Washington Post* admitted that the school was bombarded with 2,500 e-mails and 50 phone calls registering a protest. And, of course, Bill O'Reilly did a segment on this story without mentioning the Catholic League. That's why we call his show "The O'Shameless Factor."

On September 15, the two offensive comics were

pulled from the website of the newspaper and a statement of regret was issued. We are satisfied with this ending.

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## **MEL GIBSON APOLOGIZES; CRITICS EXPLOIT THE MOMENT**

In the early morning hours of July 28, Mel Gibson was arrested for suspicion of drunk driving. But what got him into the most trouble was his comment, "The Jews are responsible for all the wars in the world."

Our immediate response was to label Gibson's remark "indefensible," "anti-Semitic" and "irresponsible." But we also noted that "Fortunately, he has apologized for his bigoted outburst." Then we turned our attention elsewhere: "Unfortunately, his apology is being rejected by some who should know better." We were referring to Abraham Foxman, head of the ADL, who branded Gibson's apology "unremorseful and insufficient."

We did not hesitate to compare the ADL's reaction to the Catholic League's response to bigotry. "We have quite a file on Ted Turner at the Catholic League," Bill Donohue told the media. "Unlike Foxman, I have accepted every apology Turner has ever made for his anti-Catholic outbursts, all of which were made while he was sober. Indeed, I even went so far as to say that 'no one in his right mind' would ever put Ted Turner 'in the same camp with a Klansman or an inveterate bigot.'"

Donohue also noted that when radio shock-jocks Opie and Anthony apologized for their orchestrated anti-Catholic stunt in St. Patrick's Cathedral a few years back, he not only



accepted their apology, he was the first guest on their new CBS radio show and welcomed their return.

“But Mel’s enemies will never cut him a break,” Donohue said. That’s because “Their real goal is to discredit ‘The Passion of the Christ,’ and that is why their propaganda machine is in full gear.”

On August 1, Gibson released a statement saying, “There is no excuse, nor should there be any tolerance, for anyone who thinks or expresses any kind of anti-Semitic remark. I want to apologize specifically to everyone in the Jewish community for the vitriolic and harmful words that I have said...” Gibson said he now wants to meet one-on-one with leaders in the Jewish community “to discern the appropriate path for healing.”

Donohue responded by saying, “Mel Gibson’s apology is a model of contrition, and it reflects the genuineness of his faith.”

Regrettably, there are some for whom no amount of forgiveness will suffice (see p. 4 for some examples). That’s because they are too busy exploiting the moment in an attempt to besmirch “The Passion.”

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## MADONNA HITS ROME

Pop-singer Madonna took her “Confessions” tour to Rome on Sunday, August 4. During her song “Live To Tell,” she wore a crown of thorns while suspended from a mirrored cross.

On several national TV shows, Bill Donohue labeled Madonna’s latest stunt “an act of provocation.” Had she gone to Venice on a Saturday, he said, the Catholic League would not have registered another complaint, but her decision to perform two

miles from the Vatican on a Sunday was another matter altogether.

No wonder Jewish and Muslim leaders joined Catholic leaders in denouncing Madonna's trip to Rome—it was an in-your-face gesture that if tolerated would only have beckoned more attacks on religion. The Catholic League agreed with Bishop Velasio De Paolis, a Vatican official, who compared her act to “Satanists [who] use religious objects for Black Masses.”

Donohue appeared on NBC's “Today” show on August 6 to discuss this issue. He said Madonna's portrayal of herself as Christ on the cross was “the functional equivalent of taking a middle finger and sticking it right in the face of Christians.”

The next day on CNN's “Paula Zahn Now,” Donohue labeled Madonna's mock crucifixion “gratuitous,” saying it had nothing to do with the song. He also wondered why “She always chooses my religion. We thought we got rid of her. If she chose Muslims she might lose her head.”

It's time for this 48-year old to hang it up.

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## **MOVIE RATINGS FLAP ENDS; RELIGIOUS FILMS UNAFFECTED**

A potential showdown between the Catholic League and the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) was avoided when a highly controversial issue that we addressed was quickly resolved. Our effort was clearly worthwhile given the happy ending.

The problem began on June 7, when Kris Fuhr, vice president

for marketing at Provident Films (owned by Sony) , was quoted by Scripps Howard News Service. Fuhr said that someone at the MPAA told her that "Facing the Giants" was awarded a PG rating because the film "was heavily laden with messages from one religion and that this might offend people from other religions." The movie, which opens September 29, includes answered prayers, a miracle and references to Jesus.

We immediately confirmed Fuhr's account with her and then contacted the MPAA. Not satisfied with what we heard, we decided to press the issue. On June 13, Bill Donohue wrote Dan Glickman, chairman and CEO of the MPAA, requesting that he investigate why an "overtly" Christian film like "Facing the Giants" merited the PG red flag; in a news release on the subject, we asked our members to e-mail Glickman about their concerns.

On the evening of June 16, we received a call from Joan Graves, chairman of the MPAA ratings board. As it turns out, she was the MPAA official who spoke to Fuhr, but she had a different impression of their conversation. According to Graves, she told Fuhr that the PG rating was given because of mature issues, e.g., depression, matters relating to pregnancy and sports-related violence—not for being overtly religious.

Graves sent us a statement indicating their "long-standing policy not to comment to the press about individual films other than to give the rating and the rating reasons," but owing to the "misunderstanding that this film received a PG rating for its 'religious viewpoint,'" she felt obliged to respond. She added, "This film has a mature discussion about pregnancy, for example, as well as other elements that parents might want to be aware of. There are many religious films that have been submitted for rating, and they have garnered ratings from G to R, depending on the graphics and intensity of various elements in the film."

We are satisfied with this response and are delighted to know

that the MPAA has no policy of giving a PG rating to movies dubbed “too religious.”

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## MADONNA STRIKES AGAIN

Pop-singer Madonna kicked off her “Confessions” tour in Los Angeles by offending Christians and drawing more attention to herself. Between her political statements and oral sex jokes, Madonna found the time to don a crown of thorns, hang from a mirrored cross and croon her ballad “Live to Tell” in front of a screen flashing images from the Third World.

When the Material Girl first embraced Kabbalah, we thought her new-found faith would inspire her to show some respect for religion. It stands to reason that a woman whose faith is so important to her that she drags her rabbi to her concerts would not want to mock the faith of others.

However, Madonna proved, once again, that you really can’t teach an old pop star new tricks. She’s been spicing up her act with misappropriated Christian imagery for a long time now. Perhaps she can’t arouse any interest in her work without it. Poor Madonna keeps trying to shock. But all she succeeds in doing is coming across as a boring bigot.

In our statement to the media, we said, “Do us all a favor, Madge, and stick to singing and dancing. Knock off the Christ-bashing. It’s just pathetic.”

When Bill Donohue appeared on Paula Zahn’s CNN-TV show, he said, “If she tried it with some other religion, she may lose more than her shirt.” He added, “She certainly won’t bother the Muslims, and I think we all know why that is.”