

BISHOPS RIP PRO-ABORTION POLS; DISPUTE OVER SANCTIONS

A growing number of bishops are speaking out on the subject of pro-abortion Catholic politicians. But there is disagreement over what should be done.

Fargo, North Dakota Bishop Samuel J. Aquila said in May that denying Communion to pro-abortion politicians is part of Catholic teaching. Portland, Oregon Archbishop John G. Vlazny said that "Catholics who publicly disagree with serious Church teaching on such matters as abortion or same-sex marriage should refrain from receiving Holy Communion." Orlando, Florida Coadjutor Bishop Thomas Wenski said, "It is totally within our competence to say that one cannot be complicit in the injustice of denying the right to life to an unborn child or invalid elder and still consider oneself a good Catholic."

New Jersey bishops elicited the greatest response from area Catholics. Newark Archbishop John Myers released a public letter saying that any elected official who was pro-abortion should not receive Communion. Trenton Bishop John Smith explicitly mentioned New Jersey Governor James McGreevey saying he was "not a devout Catholic." Newly installed Camden Bishop Joseph Galante said he would not give McGreevey Communion because the governor had remarried after his divorce without obtaining an annulment. McGreevey subsequently said he would no longer receive Communion. But State Senate Majority Leader Bernard Kenny decided to leave the Church rather than alter his views on abortion.

The most controversial position was advanced by Colorado Springs Bishop Michael Sheridan. He said that not only should Catholic politicians who are pro-abortion not present themselves for Communion, anyone who votes for such politicians should refrain from doing so. Bishop Sheridan also

included illicit stem cell research, euthanasia and same-sex marriage as disqualifying issues.

Some politicians are fighting back, saying that their conscience allows them to vote for abortion rights. Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi of California, the House Minority Leader, defended herself saying that the Catholic Church respects free will. William Donohue responded by saying that the Church insists on a “well-formed conscience,” one that obliges Catholics “to acknowledge the central role of Catholic teaching in arriving at a just decision.”

That this debate is taking place in an election year raises the stakes considerably.

SCHOOL CHOICE SUCCEEDS

When school voucher programs are instituted, it stimulates public schools to improve. That, at least, is what the Florida experience shows.

In Florida, if a school receives two failing grades in a four-year period, its students can elect to go elsewhere. Performance is measured by standardized tests, and students who choose to use a voucher can attend either a private or public school. The result, a new study concludes, is that the forced competition has had the effect of improving poorly performing public schools.

The study, available online at www.educationnext.org, was conducted by Manhattan Institute researchers Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters. The peer-review study was independently affirmed by Cornell researcher Rajashri Chanrararti.

What the researchers found was that those public schools that had failed twice within a four-year period, or once within a three-year period, quickly made significant improvement. On the other hand, those public schools that were previously threatened by voucher competition (because they had failed once), but were no longer threatened (because four years had expired since their first failure), posted a decline in academic performance.

It is obvious from the Florida case that the worst fear of the public school industry—a mass exodus of students to private schools—has not materialized. What has happened is that competition has worked to everyone's benefit.

CATHOLICISM EMERGES AS ISSUE IN PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

For the first time in over four decades, Catholicism has emerged as a factor in a presidential campaign. In 1960, Massachusetts Senator John Fitzgerald Kennedy had to overcome Protestant critics who objected to having any Catholic in the White House. Now another Roman Catholic JFK from Massachusetts is the source of controversy, namely John Forbes Kerry. Only this time the critics are coming from his own camp—practicing Roman Catholics.

Kerry, the presumptive Democratic nominee for president in 2004, differs from Kennedy in a couple of ways. Though there is an Irish county by the name Kerry, there is nothing Irish about John Kerry. He is an Austrian whose paternal grandfather was a Czech Jew named Kohn. Before coming to the U.S., Kohn not only converted to Catholicism, he changed his name to

Kerry. More important, the issues facing Kerry today are not the ones that Kennedy faced in 1960.

In 1960, abortion was illegal; the birth control pill had just been made commercially available; stem cell research wasn't an issue; euthanasia was taboo; the idea of school choice—in the form of tax relief for parents who sent their children to parochial schools—was opposed by Protestants; and gay unions were unimaginable. Now abortion is legal; birth control is widely used; embryonic stem cell research is an issue; support for euthanasia, in the form of doctor-assisted suicide, is a subject that lawmakers must address; evangelical Protestants are now pro-school choice; and homosexuals want to get married.

For Kerry, these new issues are a problem. His voting record on abortion is the most radical of any senator in the nation—he votes with NARAL, the most extreme pro-abortion organization in the U.S.—100 percent of the time. He supports all methods of birth control; he votes in favor of embryonic stem cell research; he supports doctor-assisted suicide in some cases; he opposes school vouchers; and he not only advocates civil unions for gays, he is one of only 14 senators who voted against the Defense of Marriage Act.

In his new book, Kerry calls himself a “practicing and believing Catholic.” Yet in every instance mentioned above he is at odds with the teachings of the Catholic Church. Currently, the bishops are not in agreement about what should be done. So stay tuned. This is one issue that is not going to go away.

PLEDGE CASE HITS THE COURT

On March 24, the U.S. Supreme Court heard oral arguments in the Pledge of Allegiance case. The Catholic League, together with the Thomas More Law Center, filed an *amicus curiae* brief in support of the Elk Grove Unified School District that seeks to uphold the recitation of the Pledge in the schools. Challenging the school district is Michael Newdow; he objects to the words “under God” in the Pledge.

“It cannot seriously be maintained,” we said in a news release, “that the words ‘under God’ in the Pledge of Allegiance constitute the establishment of a religion.” We made the point that there is a dramatic difference between the collective acknowledgment of our religious heritage and the formal establishment of a religion. We added that Newdow is “a devout atheist” who cannot understand the difference.

Just as it makes sense not to force students to say the Pledge, it makes sense not to prevent those who choose to recite it from doing so. As our brief states, “This Court should take the opportunity to affirm once and for all that a voluntary nonsectarian invocation of God in public, especially in the public schools, does not violate the Establishment Clause, and is in fact Constitutionally consistent with our nation’s history and religious heritage.”

Ultimately, what is at stake is the right of Americans to celebrate their religious heritage on public property without fear of state reprisal. A decision will soon be rendered.

“THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST” SETS NEW RECORDS

A news story in the *New York Post* of July 16, 2003 began by saying, “Mel Gibson’s pet project ‘The Passion’ is doomed to box-office oblivion, insiders say...” On August 3, 2003, *New York Times* entertainment critic Frank Rich said, “it’s hard to imagine the movie being anything other than a flop in America.” Now all the experts are crying in their beer.

By the end of the first weekend, Mel had earned back the \$30 million he put into the film. In its first five days, it took in over \$125 million, passing “The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King” for the best gross by a movie opening on a Wednesday. By the sixth day, it broke another record when it became the highest-grossing dead-language film ever released in the U.S. After three weekends, it had taken in well in excess of a quarter billion dollars, making it one of the top 25 highest-grossing movies in history. Projections now are it will reach the \$350-400 million mark.

When the movie opened on Ash Wednesday, a group of prominent New York Catholics and Jews went to see the movie together, and then held a press conference. The Catholic contingent included Father Philip Eichner, the Catholic League’s chairman of the board of directors; league president William Donohue; Msgr. John Woolsey, pastor of St. John the Martyr in Manhattan; and Father Paul Keenan, director for radio ministry of the Archdiocese of New York. They were joined by several rabbis from the New York Board of Rabbis, including its president, Joseph Potasnik.

The press conference was huge, drawing media from around the globe. The Catholic contingent praised the movie, and the Jewish group criticized it, but all shook hands when it was over.

The day the movie opened, 1,500 students from Kellenberg Memorial High School in Uniondale, Long Island (Father Eichner is the school's president), made a "pilgrimage of faith" by processing three miles to a local theater. They did so over the objections of a Jewish woman who protested that students carrying crosses should not be allowed to walk on a public sidewalk in front of her synagogue.

Predictions that the movie would promote violence have proven unfounded. The body count is zero.

"THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST" OPENS AMIDST FUROR

The February 25th opening of "The Passion of the Christ" was one of the most anticipated openings of any movie in American history. That it opened on Ash Wednesday made it all the more special.

Advance ticket sales to the Mel Gibson film were astonishing. News reports cited many Protestant organizations buying up large blocks of tickets; they also cited the Catholic League as the most prominent of Catholic organizations purchasing advance tickets.

The Catholic League subsidized the sale of advance tickets and was sold out of 1,200 tickets in two days. So we bought another 2,000 tickets—they also sold like hotcakes. After that, we advised members to purchase advance tickets online.

Most of the pre-show publicity was positive, but the media seemed to hype the negative comments. Leading the charge against the movie were the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the Simon Wiesenthal Center. Abraham Foxman, national director

of the ADL, and Rabbi Marvin Hier, founder of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, accused Mel Gibson of fomenting anti-Semitism.

The Catholic League was not content to simply be Mel Gibson's cheerleader. We directly confronted Foxman in writing and Hier on television. Our unwavering defense of Gibson led us to charge that Foxman and Hier were guilty of poisoning Christian-Jewish relations. Though they deny this charge, their comments speak for themselves.

Things got so hot that William Donohue felt compelled to issue a 6-page "Open Letter to the Jewish Community." The letter, reprinted in this edition of *Catalyst*, expresses Donohue's concerns over some inflammatory language made by Foxman and others. In particular, Donohue takes exception to an anti-Christian remark made by Foxman.

Critics of the movie have not been content to say that they fear anti-Semitic attitudes as a result of the film; they have charged that Christians may engage in acts of violence against Jews. Donohue maintains that such language is incendiary and irresponsible.

Many Jews previewed the film and did not find it to be anti-Semitic. Therefore, the views of Foxman and Hier are not representative of the Jewish community. On the other hand, given their prominence in Jewish circles, what they say carries significant weight: the media afford them a high profile. This explains why the Catholic League has been so determined to provide a rational response.

SEX ABUSE REPORT

On February 27, professors from John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City released a report on priestly sexual abuse since 1950. In anticipation of the report, the Catholic League prepared its own report; it was released in early February. The complete document is reprinted in this edition of *Catalyst*.

The Catholic League strongly believes that no reasonable discussion of this issue can take place absent comparative data. What good does it do, we ask, to discuss sexual misconduct among priests if we don't have data on ministers, rabbis, psychologists, coaches, public school teachers and others?

The Special Report, *Sexual Abuse in Social Context: Catholic Clergy and Other Professionals*, does not excuse wrongdoing by priests or bishops. What it seeks to understand is how widespread the problem of sexual abuse is. In doing so, it directs the conversation away from an isolated look at priests and towards a more realistic examination of the problem.

The report was sent to every bishop in the U.S. and to every major media outlet in the nation. The president of the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, Bishop Wilton Gregory, thanked William Donohue for writing the report.

The initial reaction to the report has been encouraging. Many priests feel that they have been under siege in recent times: they resent being singled out for scrutiny. That is why so many of them are pleased with this report—it helps to stop the scapegoating that has been taking place.

POPE APPROVES "THE PASSION"; CRITICS OF MEL CONFOUNDED

Critics of the Mel Gibson movie, "The Passion of the Christ," are confounded. That's because the pope has seen the film and has extended his blessings. "It is as it was," Pope John Paul II said. Thus did he drive Mel's adversaries into a tizzy.

It was on December 17 that Peggy Noonan broke the story in "Opinion Journal," an online editorial posted on the *Wall Street Journal* website. The Catholic League's immediate response was to comment on those critics of Gibson—none of whom has seen the film—who harbor an agenda to discredit the film.

Consider, for example, some members of an ad hoc committee of Catholic and Jewish theologians. Paula Fredriksen has accused Gibson of promoting violence. Father John Pawlikowski has blasted the Catholic League for defending Mel, calling him a "heretic." Moreover, Philip Cunningham and Sister Mary Boys have joined the other two in denouncing Gibson for allegedly violating their own trumped-up rules governing depictions of the Passion. "Acting like proponents of a neo-Hays code," we said, "they arrogantly think Mel should have had to run the film by them for approval." We then said, "He doesn't have to—the pope's on board."

About a week before the pope bestowed his blessings on the movie, several top Vatican officials gave their unanimous approval to the film. Members of the Vatican Secretariat of State, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (which oversees doctrinal issues) applauded Gibson for his efforts.

Father Augustine Di Noia, undersecretary of the doctrinal congregation, offered the most cogent statement on the

question of who is to blame for the crucifixion of Christ. He said that “each of the main characters contributes in some way to Jesus’ fate: Judas betrays him; the Sanhedrin accuses him; the disciples abandon him; Peter denies knowing him; Herod toys with him; Pilate allows him to be condemned; the crowd mocks him; the Roman soldiers scourge, brutalize and finally crucify him; and the devil, somehow, is behind the whole action.” Only Mary, Di Noia observes, “is really blameless.”

When asked point-blank whether the movie is anti-Semitic, Di Noia said, “There is absolutely nothing anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish about Mel Gibson’s film.” Father Gus Di Noia, a Catholic League member, has said it just right.

CENSORING CHRISTMAS

Every December the Catholic League goes into high gear confronting those who attempt to censor Christmas. This year was no exception.

Unfortunately, the long-awaited ruling on the New York City schools did not come down. So another year went by without nativity scenes in the schools; Jewish menorahs and Islamic crescent and stars were allowed.

We fought the good fight all over the nation and won three major victories. We had a public library in Meriden, Connecticut restore paintings of Jesus that officials of the library had banned. We threatened a lawsuit against a public school outside of Philadelphia for removing a nativity scene (while allowing a menorah), and we succeeded in having the crèche restored. And we persuaded officials at Central Michigan University to remove a “Warning” to Christians—posted on the school’s website—on how to properly celebrate Christmas

without offending others.

It is really getting out of hand. As William Donohue told Fox News Channel talk-show host Neil Cavuto, there is a South African element at work: the majority of the population seems to be losing its rights to the minority. In South Africa, black Africans comprised better than 90 percent of the population, yet the power was in the hands of the white minority. In the U.S., every December there is a war on Christian symbols—even though Christians comprise 85 percent of the population.

There is a lot more on these and related stories in this issue of *Catalyst*.



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MEL GIBSON'S FOES OVERHEAT; SMEAR CAMPAIGN BACKFIRES

Critics of Mel Gibson's film, "The Passion of Christ," are becoming unhinged, but their smear campaign is backfiring.

For example, on November 6, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) convened its 90th Annual National Meeting at New York's Plaza Hotel. One of the sessions explored the controversy over the film.

Paula Fredriksen, professor of theology at Boston University, commented that the movie was "inflammatory," saying it was in the "toxic tradition of blaming Jews for the death of Jesus." She also predicted that the film "could very possibly elicit violence against Jews." Fredriksen has not seen the movie.

Sister Mary C. Boys, professor of Judeo-Christian Studies, Union Theological Seminary, ridiculed Gibson for saying he believed he was guided by the Holy Spirit in making the movie. "I don't believe that [given the divisive result] that he could claim that the Holy Spirit is behind this." Boys has not seen the movie.

Abraham H. Foxman, the ADL's national director, said Gibson was riddled with prejudice: "I think he's infected—seriously infected—with some very, very serious anti-Semitic views." Foxman has not seen the movie.

The only ADL official to see the movie is Rabbi Eugene Korn. Almost alone in his critical view of the film, Korn nonetheless couldn't stomach the overheated style of Foxman. So he quit. His resignation comes at a time when many Jewish leaders are questioning the ADL's strategy.

Elan Steinberg, an official of the World Jewish Congress, openly wondered whether Jews were alienating "those who are our allies in many struggles." Gilbert Rosenthal of the National Council of Synagogues also said the ADL's approach was backfiring. Rabbi Michael Cook, a Hebrew Union professor, warned that Jews who are predicting violence following the film "risk embarrassment when it hits the theaters."

Other Jewish critics of the ADL's strong-armed approach include Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, president of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, and Rabbi Daniel Lapin of Toward Tradition.

Orthodox Jewish film critic Michael Medved said it best when he accused Foxman of "marginalizing himself." Medved really unloaded when he commented that Foxman's campaign "is provoking far more anti-Semitism than the movie itself ever could."

This is what happens when an advocacy campaign overheats. The Catholic League, of course, not only issues statements of support for Mel Gibson, we publicly chastise his harshest critics