

CATHOLIC LEAGUE FOR RELIGIOUS AND CIVIL RIGHTS 2016 YEAR IN REVIEW

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Bill Donohue

Twenty years ago, I wrote that “the most invidious form of anti-Catholicism is that which emanates from elite circles.” I also noted that “there is also a brand of anti-Catholicism that comes from less urbane quarters, from places that target the undereducated. And no one is better at doing this than Chick Publications.”

In 2016, the founder of that company, Jack Chick, died at the age of 92.

We fought him for years, exposing his efforts to convince Protestants of how “un-Christian” Catholics are. He was ahead of his time in his ability to get his message out: he not only published books and magazines, he printed an endless stream of 3×5 inch cartoon-like booklets that were released all over the world. “Are Roman Catholics Christian?” was one of his most famous.

Do you know who really hated Jack Chick? Liberal Catholics. They are able to demonstrate tremendous tolerance when the Church is beaten up by the establishment, but don’t let anyone accuse them of not being able to think for themselves. That is why they rarely complain when those in the artistic community, education, the media, and the entertainment industry, bash Catholicism—they desperately want to be accepted by the secular elites.

Jack Chick's contribution to anti-Catholicism, significant though it was, is not the kind of fare that should worry Catholics these days. Assaults on religious liberty is what should concern them—the Catholic League gives them priority—and this is especially true when the agent of hostility is the government.

When the Church is sued for administering the sacraments, we can no longer take religious liberty for granted. That is why we fought back. The good news is that we won.

In 2014, a lawsuit was filed in Louisiana that, had it succeeded, would have effectively gutted the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We quickly filed an amicus brief, coming to the defense of Father Jeff Bayhi. He was sued by the parents of a girl for failing to report to the authorities that she was abused by a lay member of the parish (who has since passed away). He reportedly learned of this in the confessional, which is precisely why he did not report it.

After first losing in the State Supreme Court, we won in the State District Court. The final decision came in October when the Louisiana Supreme Court upheld that decision, stating that the seal of the confessional must be respected by the government as a matter of religious liberty.

Still unresolved is the right of the federal government to dictate to Catholic non-profits what they must cover in their healthcare plans. This is an issue we have been fighting for years, and 2016 was no exception. We took advantage of every media opportunity to press our case against the Obama administration's Health and Human Services mandate.

It is currently in limbo: the U.S. Supreme Court dodged the issue by ordering the lower courts to reconsider the constitutionality of the mandate. If it became law, it would mean that such entities as the Little Sisters of the Poor would have to pay for abortion-inducing drugs in their

healthcare plans.

The justices asked both sides to submit new legal briefs, requesting that alternatives be explored. Not until a ninth justice is named to the high court will this issue be settled. President-elect Donald Trump has pledged to appoint judges who respect religious liberties, so the prospects are encouraging.

What is not encouraging is the sight of lawyers employed by the federal government who show nothing but contempt for religious liberty. To be specific, a document was issued in September by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights that set off the alarms. I called it “the most anti-First Amendment report issued by any agency of the federal government.”

I was referring to a report, *Peaceful Coexistence: Reconciling Non-Discrimination Principles with Civil Liberties*. The title was a misnomer: no attempt was made to reconcile anything. Instead, the document made it very clear that when there is a showdown between non-discrimination and religious liberty, the latter should yield. Never mind that religious liberty is enshrined in the First Amendment, and that non-discrimination is not part of the Bill of Rights—we need to reconstruct the Constitution.

According to Martin R. Castro, the Obama appointee who authored this report, “The phrases ‘religious liberty’ and ‘religious freedom’ will stand for nothing except for hypocrisy so long as they remain code words for discrimination, intolerance, racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia, Christian supremacy or any other form of intolerance.”

Castro did not define what he means by “Christian supremacy,” but it is not a stretch to think he meant nativity scenes at Christmastime, and other “offenses.” Fortunately, many others besides the Catholic League pushed back hard—the bishops jumped on this as well—the result being that there were no

legs to Castro's gambit.

The big news of 2016, of course, was the election of Trump. We were drawn into the presidential race, though we stayed clear of endorsing anyone. Our first foray came early in the year when many in the media misrepresented to Pope Francis what Trump said about immigration, and then distorted the pope's response. I am happy to say that I got a chance to correct the record when I was interviewed by Fox News as part of the lead news story of the night.

The pope was set up. He was told that Trump "wants to deport 11 million illegal immigrants, thus separating families." That was patently false. Earlier, Trump said on "Meet the Press" that he would not split up families, explicitly saying, "No, we're going to keep the families together."

Another media falsehood was floated when reporters condensed the pope's reaction to Trump's alleged position, thus distorting his words. "Trump is Not a Christian" is how the media characterized the pope's reaction. What the pope actually said was, "A person who thinks *only* about building walls...is not a Christian." He added, "I say only that this man is not a Christian if he has said things like that...and in this, *I give the benefit of the doubt.*" The qualifying words that I italicized were conveniently omitted from most news stories.

I did more than correct the record when it came to Hillary Clinton: I unintentionally set the table for the FBI to disable her. Here's what happened.

It started out innocently enough. On August 31, I read a front-page story in the *New York Post* on how former congressman Anthony Weiner used his own four-year-old son, Jordan, as a "chick magnet" to lure sexual relations with women. Weiner's wife, Huma Abedin, is a top aide to Clinton. This was the second story in three days on Weiner's

perversions.

Having been sickened by the abuse scandal in the Church, as well as by the way the media have played it—they rarely report on the sexual abuse of minors in other communities, secular or religious—I filed a formal complaint with the authorities asking for an investigation of Weiner.

My request was honored. In the course of looking for child pornography on Weiner's laptop, the New York Police Department found that his computer was shared by Abedin. Not only that, emails sent by her to Clinton on her private server were discovered. The NYPD then contacted the FBI and it started a new probe.

After she lost to Trump, Clinton blamed FBI director James Comey for losing the election. Specifically, she said it was his announcement on October 28 that a new round of investigations were under way that turned voters against her. Of course, had she not had her own private server when she was Secretary of State, this would not have become an issue.

Moreover, had it not been for my complaint to the New York City branch of the New York State Administration for Children's Services, requesting that Weiner be investigated for child abuse, Comey would not have gotten involved. And had it not been for media bias against priests, I would not have felt obliged to press this case. It is strange how history unfolds.

Hollywood had a field day in 2016 with the issue of priestly sexual abuse. Though the latest data show that exactly .01 percent of the Catholic clergy had a credible accusation made against them for sexually abusing minors, Hollywood fed the media's appetite for Catholic bashing when it gave "Spotlight" the Oscar for "best picture." The film was based on the scandal in the Boston archdiocese.

The movie itself was not the problem—the scandal was as real

as it was devastating—the problem was projecting a falsehood to the public: the media, and many in Hollywood (including those connected to the movie), sold the pernicious notion that the scandal is ongoing. It is not: the Church has a better record on this issue than any institution in the nation. It is in the public schools, and in places such as Hollywood, where child rape is commonplace, though there is little interest in pursuing them.

Another facet to this story is the way state lawmakers seek to “correct” the problem of the sexual abuse of minors by writing laws that target only private (read: Catholic) schools. New York and Pennsylvania were the two most aggressive states pushing to selectively punish Catholic offenders while letting public school molesters off the hook. We fought all such patently biased bills, doing so with great effect in New York.

The Catholic League started its war on these discriminatory bills in March, and in June we declared victory: the bill by Assemblywoman Margaret Markey, like all her previous ones, failed. Better still, after more than a decade of vindictively sticking it to the Catholic Church—only once did she include the public schools in her bill—she not only lost, she was voted out of office.

We pulled out all the stops to defeat Markey. On April 1, I wrote to everyone in the New York State legislature requesting that bills which suspend the statute of limitations for crimes involving the sexual abuse of minors be reconsidered. Instead of applying only to private schools, I asked that they consider bills that only apply to the public schools. My point, of course, was to point out the absurdity, the hypocrisy, and the injustice of selectively pursuing such crimes.

I also wrote a full-page ad that was placed in the Albany *Times Union* exposing these machinations. Titled “Sexual Abuse Lobby Is Agenda-Ridden,” I laid bare the activists and lawyers

whose goal it was to punish Catholic molesters while allowing public school employees to escape scot-free. It hit a chord.

The hero in this struggle was Cardinal Timothy Dolan. He worked overtime to secure justice. Also active was Brooklyn Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio, a good man who was libeled by Markey: she accused him of once offering to bribe her in return for dropping her bill. We called her out for this smear. Her stunt failed as even many on her side didn't believe her. She had no evidence whatsoever.

We were delighted when another vengeful public servant, Pennsylvania Attorney General Kathleen Kane, was driven from office. Like Markey, she had it out for the Catholic Church, and like the New York lawmaker, the Catholic League tangled with Kane, pointing out how duplicitous she was. Her maniacal interest in pursuing old cases involving Catholic schools, while turning a blind eye to abuse incidents in non-Catholic settings, was abhorrent.

What drove Kane from office, however, was not the voters: she was convicted on nine counts, including two felony perjury charges, for leaking grand jury information, and then lying about it. Justice was done, even if she got away with her unethical assault on the Catholic Church.

Justice was also done when the courts repeatedly turned back ACLU attempts to force Catholic hospitals to violate the teachings of the Catholic Church. The issues that the ACLU seized on were abortion, contraception, and sterilization; these are non-negotiable subjects for Catholic hospitals.

At the beginning of the year, San Francisco Superior Judge Ernest Goldman dismissed the ACLU's attempt to force Mercy Medical Center in California to carry out sterilization procedures. In the spring, the ACLU lost in the U.S. District Court of Michigan when it sought to coerce Trinity Health Corporation, a Catholic non-profit, to perform abortions. It

also made another failed effort to revisit the Mercy Medical Center case, this time supported by the California Medical Association.

In all of these instances, the ACLU proved why it has a reputation for being a foe of religion, and there is no religion it seeks to upend more than Catholicism.

Sometimes our role in fighting anti-Catholicism doesn't yield quick results, but when we eventually win, the victory is still sweet.

At the end of last year, I wrote to Tennessee lawmakers who oversee education issues about a serious problem that arose at the University of Tennessee. Its Office of Diversity and Inclusion had literally sought to censor Christmas. Students were warned to make sure that "your holiday party is not a Christmas party in disguise." They were also instructed not to "play games with religious and cultural themes, such as 'Dreidel' or 'Secret Santa.'"

The lawmakers followed through with the requested investigation and in the spring it was announced that they voted to strip the Office of Diversity and Inclusion of \$337,000 in state funds. Justice was done.

Our protest of a situation at Colorado State University did not result in a clear-cut victory, but it did yield important dividends nonetheless.

The university's student senate proposed a "diversity bill" that granted senate seats to various constituents on campus; those representing adult learning, veterans, the disabled, LGBT students, women's groups, and various racial and ethnic groups were recognized. But when students asked for equal treatment for Jewish, Catholic, and Muslim students, they were denied.

I contacted the Dean of Students on this issue, and after much

haggling, she said that all parties to the controversy have learned from this experience and that it was an opportunity to grow as an academic community. Much more should have been done, but this is the way many administrators react when pressed by advocacy organizations. It is a safe bet, however, that our message was delivered.

When Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez was embroiled in a fight over a California bill that would have undermined important exemptions to religious schools, we quickly joined his effort. The result was the bill was revised, and the onerous portions were stricken.

The bill would have required religious schools that receive state funds to provide bathrooms based on “gender identity,” rather than male-female. It would have required that married dorms be opened to same-sex couples. In fact, the bill permitted the government to decide what “religious practices” and “rules for moral conduct,” would be acceptable.

We pushed back, as did others, making basic religious-liberty arguments. While the outcome was auspicious, the very fact that we had to fight for our religious tenets, suggests how hostile some lawmakers are to Catholicism.

Over Labor Day weekend, there was an ugly incident involving a high school football game in Scottsdale, Arizona. After parents complained, and we learned of what happened, we contacted school officials. An investigation was launched. The outcome was another demonstration of our clout. Here’s what occurred.

Prior to a game between a Catholic school and a public school, a statue of Our Blessed Mother was vandalized on the campus of the Catholic school. During the game, a student dressed as Jesus paraded up and down the sidelines, mocking Catholics.

The vandals were gross: they attached a sex toy to the lower half of the Virgin Mary statue, and over its head they put a

mask of Hillary Clinton. The “dancing Jesus” character continued his stunt in the second half of the game, even after parents complained.

We contacted the Interim Superintendent of the Scottsdale Unified School District and she responded professionally, and with dispatch. She apologized for what happened, commenced an investigation, and thanked the Catholic League for its intervention.

Macy’s earned our ire when it fired a senior store detective at a store in Queens, New York for merely holding to Catholic beliefs on sexuality. After a woman and her daughter found a man dressed as a woman in the women’s restroom, they complained, and the detective arranged for him to be removed; the cross-dressing man was told to use the men’s room.

However, the offending male reported this incident to Macy’s officials, and, incredibly, they informed the detective that he was the problem. Unbeknownst to him, Macy’s allows cross-dressing men to use the ladies room. The detective said he was unaware of this policy, adding that it ran against his Catholic convictions. But he insisted he would nonetheless enforce the policy going forward. This wasn’t good enough—he was fired. The man secured an attorney and the case was taken up by the New York State Division of Human Rights.

This is thought control: the man was terminated for his religious beliefs—not his behavior. Consequently, we pounded the mega-department store with one news release after another. In addition, I wrote an op-ed page ad in the *New York Times* alerting the public to this outrageous condition. To be sure, Macy’s got a black eye as a result, but at year’s end there was no final adjudication to this vindictive act.

As we saw in the case involving the University of Tennessee, there are occasions when our initial involvement does not lead to a desired result, but eventually it does. This, we believe,

will be the case with our protest of the ABC show, "The Real O'Neals."

The show is loosely based on the life of Dan Savage, a vile anti-Catholic whose vulgar language is a staple of his routine. That Disney, which owns ABC, would give this man a platform (he is also an associate producer of the show) does not speak well for the supposedly family-friendly entertainment giant.

On February 29, the *New York Times* ran an op-ed page ad I wrote, "Shame on Disney-ABC." It detailed our objections to the persistent mocking of Catholicism by cast characters, and underscored our central objection to the program: Dan Savage's role. Commenting on Savage's history of hate speech, I said, "His filthy remarks about Jesus and Our Blessed Mother are so over the top that they would make Larry Flynt blush."

The ratings of "The Real O'Neals" were not great, but Disney-ABC did not want to appear to bow to pressure, so it stood by it for another season. We predict it will be pulled in 2017.

Mother Teresa was canonized on the Sunday of Labor Day weekend. The media, for the most part, treated her fairly. In anticipation of what could have been an onslaught of Catholic bashing, beating up on this saintly woman, I got out in front of the looming controversy by writing a book, *Unmasking Mother Teresa's Critics*.

The book had more footnotes than it did pages, and for a reason: I did not want anyone saying these were just Donohue's unsupported claims. I took on all of her most famous detractors, the late Christopher Hitchens being the most prominent among them.

How much my book contributed to the media's respectful hearing of Mother Teresa's contributions is impossible to know. But if it helped at all, it was surely worthwhile. She was a very special person, and Catholics have every reason to be proud of

her.

No year ends without fighting another round of battles over Christmas, and 2016 was no exception. Satanists and atheists proved they have more in common than separates them—they adorned the public square with their protesting symbols on the same sites as nativity scenes, seeking to neuter the meaning of Christmas.

The Catholic League fought and won a battle in the Portland, Oregon area when a school district banned Santa, as well as religious symbols, from the office doors of school employees. The good news is that our protest led district officials to apologize and rescind the ban.

The singing of “Silent Night” was cause for opposition in a Mesa, Arizona school, and a cross atop a crèche was banned in Indiana. Regarding the latter, our side fought back: after the ACLU succeeded in censoring the cross, the folks in Knightstown, Indiana blanketed the town with crosses on lawns, parks, and local shops—they were everywhere!

The election of Donald Trump may signal a change for the better on religious liberty issues. We will know in due course. No matter what he does, the Catholic League will still be integrally involved in the culture war. We have the determination and the resources to win. Bet on it.