

CATHOLIC LEAGUE FOR RELIGIOUS AND CIVIL RIGHTS 2017 YEAR IN REVIEW

CATHOLIC LEAGUE FOR RELIGIOUS AND CIVIL RIGHTS 2017 YEAR IN REVIEW

Bill Donohue

“The election of Donald Trump may signal a change for the better on religious liberty issues. We will know in due course.” That is how I concluded the “2016 Year in Review.”

Trump’s persona is difficult to take, but his policies on religious liberty are a welcome change from the decisions rendered by the Obama administration. It is not even a close call.

“Trump Will Be Religion Friendly.” That is the title of an article I wrote in the first edition of *Catalyst in 2017*. I cited some of his appointees as evidence, one of whom, Betsy DeVos, came under heavy fire for her support for school choice; she does not believe in discriminating against religious schools.

“There is one more important consideration,” I noted. “To the extent that Trump makes appointing pro-life judges a priority, he is likely to select men and women who will honor our right to religious liberty; competing rights will not be eviscerated, but they will not eclipse our First Amendment right.”

It didn’t take long before Trump made good on his pledge: His selection of [Judge Neil Gorsuch](#) to take the place of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia on the Supreme Court was brilliant.

While Trump only had one pick to make for the high court, he appointed many fine men and women to the federal bench. His most contentious choice was Amy Coney Barrett, a professor at Notre Dame Law School. On the merits, she was clearly qualified. But then bigotry came into play.

Barrett was targeted by Sen. Dianne Feinstein and Sen. Dick Durbin, both of whom made remarks that smacked of anti-Catholic bigotry. Feinstein came “perilously close,” I said, to establishing “a religious test.” I [wrote](#) to the two of them outlining my concerns.

Trump issued an executive order on religious liberty that, while lacking teeth, gave direction to his cabinet on how to proceed. That point was missed by some of his most serious critics. He also took on Planned Parenthood, signing a bill that allows the states to strip the abortion mill of funding.

When the president and the pope met, the media tried to spin the meeting as one in which Pope Francis had to bite his tongue, even to the point of selecting pictures that tried to prove their point. But as we pointed out, [Pope Francis differed with President Obama](#) on serious issues much more than he did with President Trump. We also [demonstrated](#) how the photos were chosen to elicit a preconceived conclusion.

During Obama’s two terms, nothing angered practicing Catholics more than his Health and Human Services (HHS) mandate. It was designed to force Catholic non-profit organizations to pay for abortion-inducing drugs, contraceptives and sterilization. Trump undercut the HHS mandate by providing an exemption to religious organizations; it was a big win for religious liberty.

The Catholic League has long been hated by the enemies of religious liberty. One of the haters, attorney Rebecca Randles, sued me and the league for allegedly libeling a man several years ago. It was a bogus lawsuit from the get-go, and

she knew it. The case bounced around in the federal courts—she lost every single appeal—until it ended in 2017 in a [victory](#) for us. Kudos to Erin Mersino for representing us, and to the Thomas More Law Center for picking up the case.

Another source of hate is SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests). We have been battling it for decades, showing it for the fraud that it is. In 2017, it crashed. The two top leaders were forced to quit, leaving in disgrace. This is a long story, but it is well worth [reading](#).

Horror tales about cruel Irish nuns abusing women and children are part of the propaganda spewed by Catholic bashers. The lies that make up this folklore came to the surface in 2017 when the bodies of 800 children were allegedly found on the grounds of a Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, outside of Galway. No media outlet distorted the truth more than Irish Central. We took great delight in [debunking the lies](#).

One nun who continues to draw the attention of bigots is Saint Teresa of Calcutta. Mother Teresa, as she is still fondly called, was the source of an obscene depiction by a New York City store, the Bedford Cheese Shop. Our fast response generated a healthy protest, resulting in a [victory](#): the offensive statement against her was withdrawn and an apology was issued by the store's owner.

When the haters aren't attacking nuns, they are setting their sights on priests. They love to talk about priestly sexual abuse, as if that is still a big problem. It isn't. As we indicated, [.004 percent](#) of the clergy had a new substantiated case made against him between July 1, 2015 and June 30, 2016.

There is no top Catholic clergyman in the world who has been subjected to more false allegations, and indeed harassment, than Cardinal George Pell of Australia. The [war](#) against him is an outrage, and the Australian government, as we [detailed](#), is no better.

It is not an easy time to be a practicing Christian on college campuses these days, and if anyone doubts this to be true, let him [read](#) what happened at Rollins College.

A militant Muslim feminist professor berated a Christian student at the Florida college, violating his religious liberty and freedom of speech. We intervened, and after a protracted battle with school officials, we helped secure victory for the student. It was an ugly chapter.

The culture war picked up steam in 2017 when monuments and statues of iconic Americans were condemned by left-wing fanatics. We dubbed it "[Monument Madness](#)," showing how politicized and dishonest the campaign is. This [war](#) was driven by hate; there was nothing noble about it. I [testified](#) in New York City about this issue, drawing a rather surprised response from the audience.

The entertainment industry is always fodder for trouble. We finally won our battle with the ABC show, "[The Real O'Neals](#)." It would have gotten the ax earlier but the network did not want to appear to be giving in to us.

The big news in 2017, however, was the implosion of Hollywood stars caught up in a dirty web of sexual abuse scandals.

If the Hollywood celebrities who were outed as predators had no history of anti-Catholicism, it would mean little to us. But when the likes of Harvey Weinstein are fingered, it matters a great deal.

The two of us squared off against each other [many times before](#), so when the news broke about his pathological behavior, we couldn't help but recount all of the sick portrayals he made over the years about priests, and every aspect of Catholicism.

It was not just Hollywood moguls who were called on the carpet for sexual misconduct; politicians such as Sen. Al Franken,

were named. We [listed](#) the vile comments he has made about priests, calling for his resignation.

No one in the entertainment business has relentlessly offended Catholics as much as Bill Maher. When he unloaded on Christians at the end of the year—after giving his buddies [Louis C.K. and Franken a pass](#)—we unloaded on him. We launched a [petition](#) asking HBO to discipline Maher the way they did when he offended African Americans; we also cited HBO's decision to remove all shows that the station carried by Louis C.K. Thousands responded to our call.

As more and more celebrities were outed as predators, we put together a "[Special Report](#) on Sexual Deviants and Sexual Enablers who Trashed Catholicism." It detailed accusations made against the offenders and those who covered up for them; we also included a selection of their condemnations of the Catholic Church, most of which dealt with clergy sexual misconduct.

More hypocrisy surfaced at the end of the year when the [Boston Globe](#) revealed that it would not release the names of sexual abusers in its employ. This same newspaper received a Pulitzer Prize for uncovering sexual abuse by priests, and a film, "Spotlight," was made about it. But it now insisted that there should be one standard for the Catholic Church—full disclosure—and one standard for the *Globe*—respect for privacy rights and confidentiality.

This story was followed by one from the [New York Times](#). It said that reporter Glenn Thrush, who was found guilty by the newspaper of sexual misconduct, could stay on the job; he was required to undergo counseling. Unlike what it had repeatedly demanded from the Catholic Church, the authorities were never contacted, and the offending party was allowed to remain on the payroll. Counseling, which the *Times* often said was an insufficient response to sexual misdeeds, was now seen as sufficient.

At year's end we experienced another round of attacks on Christmas. The most prominent early offender was a [ruling](#) by the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority to deny the Archdiocese of Washington the right to place a Christmas ad on the exterior of D.C. buses. The ad never depicted, or mentioned, Jesus, but that didn't matter to the anti-Christmas bureaucrats. They censored it.

Those responsible for the "War on Christmas" tried to argue that it doesn't exist. It didn't work. To that end, we issued a [report](#) providing all the details.

The most notorious assaults on Christmas came from the much vaunted, but much discredited, venue of free speech—college campuses. First prize went to the University of Minnesota: it decreed that Santa Claus, Christmas trees, and the colors of red and green were inappropriate "religious iconography" during the holidays.

We ended the year comparing how President Barack Obama and President Donald Trump fared on religious liberty issues during their first year. After providing the [evidence](#), we concluded that Obama was not a religion-friendly president, but Trump surely was.

As always, we are grateful for the support of our members. Without them, there is no Catholic League. Many thanks to all.