

CATHOLIC LEAGUE FOR RELIGIOUS AND CIVIL RIGHTS 2018 YEAR IN REVIEW

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Bill Donohue

Victory is sweet, even if it takes what seems like an eternity to secure. In January, we protested the most obscene anti-Catholic play ever produced, “Jerry Springer: The Opera,” but we didn’t know the outcome of our efforts until November. When we won, the wait was well worth it.

Over the years, we’ve protested lots of vile attacks stemming from the artistic community: sometimes we lead a demonstration, and sometimes we seek to have the exhibition pulled (especially when public funds are involved). This time we chose a different strategy: we implored the president to pick a responsible chairman to lead the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). President Donald Trump did just that in November when he chose Mary Anne Carter.

“Jerry Springer: The Opera” received NEA funds via the production company, The New Group, an Off-Broadway site. We decided that the most effective way to stop using public funds to assault Catholic sensibilities was to get the right person to run the NEA. That led to a press conference at the National Press Club on January 23.

Joining me at the event was Dr. Deal Hudson, president of the Morley Institute on Church and Culture and a member of the Catholic League’s board of directors; Brent Bozell, president of the Media Research Center and member of the Catholic League’s advisory board; and Ralph Reed, chairman of the Faith

and Freedom Coalition.

On January 24, I wrote to President Trump asking him to nominate a responsible chairman of the NEA, and the next day I challenged Dr. Jane Chu, the sitting NEA head, to justify spending public funds on Catholic hate speech. We exchanged letters. Soon after Carter was selected as acting chairman of the NEA, and on November 1 she was officially nominated to succeed Dr. Chu.

In March, we had a role in an important victory when New York City officials decided not to take down the statue of Columbus in Columbus Circle. Here's how our contribution evolved.

I had testified at the end of 2017 questioning the propriety of honoring Frederick Douglass, the ex-slave who had done great work opposing slavery but was nonetheless an anti-Catholic bigot (I did not support taking down his statue in Central Park). I also used the occasion to ask officials not to cave in to political correctness by dishonoring Columbus, a view that was shared by other Catholics who testified. Common sense prevailed and Columbus Circle was not altered.

We had another stellar victory at the end of March when Connecticut Supreme Court Judge Andrew McDonald failed in his bid to become Chief Justice. He was defeated March 27 by a vote of 19-16.

We had locked horns with McDonald when he was a state senator. In 2011, he introduced a bill that was an unprecedented power grab: the government would take over the fiscal and administrative decisions of the Catholic Church in Connecticut. Moreover, lay Catholics would be authorized to run the internal affairs of their parish, throwing the pastor overboard. McDonald failed, largely due to the efforts of then-Bridgeport Bishop William Lori, with strong support from the Catholic League. McDonald then became a Supreme Court judge.

When McDonald sought to become Chief Justice, we were galvanized once again. He tried to portray himself as the victim of an anti-gay campaign, but it didn't work. As I told the media, *"There was not one person or group identified in all of these stories who has said anything anti-gay about him."* In fact, only McDonald's fellow Democrats drew attention to his homosexual status.

We had reason to claim another victory in June when our efforts, along with that of others, paid off: an attempt to silence the voice of the clergy dealing with the sex education curriculum in Fairfax, Virginia failed.

I put the following question to school authorities: "Is the Fairfax County school board prepared to spend large sums of money on a lawsuit challenging its discriminatory initiative?" Fortunately, the school board voted down a proposal that would have stopped the clergy from counseling young people beset with sexual problems.

Everyone is affected by the pop culture, and this is especially true of young people. Many TV shows are not only unfair to those who hold traditional moral values—they are routinely disparaged—those who are practicing Christians are further ridiculed. In 2018, no one beat Samantha Bee, whose TBS show, "Full Frontal," was positively crude.

Bee began the year bashing Catholics on an almost weekly basis. But she really crossed the line in the spring when she invoked the "C-word" to describe the president's daughter, Ivanka. We had had enough.

We started a boycott of select sponsors, choosing those with a family-friendly reputation. In a matter of a few months, we managed to get the following companies to stop advertising on Bee's show: Verizon, Procter and Gamble, Wendy's, Ashley HomeStore, the Wonderful Company (maker of pistachios), Popeyes, and Burger King.

Bee got the message and stopped with her vicious attacks on Catholics (and the president's daughter). We halted our boycott in the fall, pledging to monitor her show for any future offenses.

Nothing consumed us more in 2018 than the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church. It was back in the news over the summer and the fall, angering Catholics who were hit with new revelations about old cases. Our job, as always, was to fight wrongdoing against the Church without ever defending wrongdoing by the Church. We had our work cut out for ourselves.

There were three big stories that dominated the news. One was an accusation made against Cardinal Theodore McCarrick that he molested a minor decades ago; it was New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan who made public the charge (his own commission on this subject found the accusation to be credible). The second issue was the release of a Pennsylvania grand jury report on clergy sexual abuse extending back to World War II. The third matter was the decision by Pope Francis to block efforts by the U.S. bishops to adopt new rules governing episcopal accountability.

The first and third stories involved internal Church issues, and were therefore outside of our purview. But the second story was right up our alley: we protested the lack of due process afforded the accused, as well as clear falsehoods contained in the grand jury report.

When the grand jury report was released, I wrote a lengthy rebuttal, seeking to correct many myths that colored most media accounts. No one had been found guilty of anything, and none of the accused had a chance to tell his side of the story. That's because almost all the cases stemmed from the last century and most of the accused were either dead or out of ministry.

No other institution was subjected to this kind of scrutiny: for example, other religious institutions, as well as the public schools, were let off scot free. Catholics, I argued, were being played—they were being set up to believe the worst about their religion absent any comparative data on other organizations.

We did not take this lying down. We secured the work of a Pittsburgh law firm, Porter Wright Morris & Arthur; the attorneys challenged several aspects of the grand jury report that was released by Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro. He was not unknown to Catholics in the Keystone state, having singled out the Church before in order to impugn its moral authority.

On September 21, the law firm filed an *amicus curiae* brief in the Western District of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania. Our position was unambiguous: anyone who hurts a minor must be prosecuted to the full extent of the law, but such investigations and prosecutions must be conducted in accordance with the protections required by the United States Constitution and the Pennsylvania Constitution.

At the end of October, the CBS show, “60 Minutes,” got into the act by doing a segment on Buffalo Bishop Richard J. Malone. He had admitted making a few bad decisions but defended his overall record. From our perspective, it was the questionable remarks made by Malone’s former executive assistant, and the incredible duplicity of CBS—it had had its fair share of predators in high-ranking jobs but never turned its “60 Minutes” cameras on them—that deserved to be exposed.

From the end of November to the beginning of December, I had an email exchange with top officials at the *Boston Globe* over a study the newspaper did, along with the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, on the way U.S. bishops have handled cases of clergy sexual abuse. It proved to be revealing.

The two newspapers made a big news splash at the beginning of November when they released the findings of a study which claimed that one-third of current bishops—more than 130—have been “accused” during their careers of “inadequately” responding to sexual abuse. The study appeared just prior to a bishops’ conference in Baltimore, which dealt with this subject.

I have a nose for this kind of thing. This explains my use of quotation marks. Accused by whom? And on what basis was the determination made that the response was inadequate? I also sensed that probably no one ever asked to see the raw data. So I did.

The week before Thanksgiving, I emailed Brian McGrory, editor of the *Boston Globe*, asking permission to examine the court records, media reports and transcripts of interviews that reporters had with church officials, victims, and attorneys. When he didn’t answer, I asked again, this time mailing the request to his office.

After Thanksgiving, I received an email from Scott Allen, Assistant Managing Editor for Projects. He said I could not see the data because the newspaper decided not to publish it. I then asked to be given permission to at least read the transcripts of the interviews (which had been my real interest all along), but was again turned down.

Allen said they decided not to publish the transcripts on their website, so therefore I couldn’t see them. I asked why they wouldn’t post them, and he replied that they conduct interviews all the time and don’t publish the transcripts. Here is how I responded.

“But this is different. This is not a news story. I am a sociologist who is interested in seeing the raw data of a research project whose conclusions have been made public. It is common practice in professional research undertakings to

make public the data upon which the conclusions have been made.”

That was the end of the exchange.

These newspaper officials demand total transparency from the bishops, wanting to see every entry in every priest personnel file, but their interest in transparency is a one-way street—it never applies to them.

It was a source of great satisfaction that I exposed the two newspapers for failing to cooperate. I can just imagine which victims’ leaders, and their Church-suing attorneys, were selected for an interview. I have long called many of them out, showing them to be liars.

On December 3, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled in a 6-1 decision that the Pennsylvania grand jury report on the Catholic clergy cannot make public the names of 11 priests who challenged the release of their identities; they claimed that doing so would violate their constitutional rights as guaranteed by the state constitution.

The Catholic League *amicus curiae* brief, which was cited in the court ruling, proved victorious.

The priests maintained that they did not have an opportunity to challenge the accusations made against them to the grand jury. Moreover, they said the report contained “false, misleading, incorrect and unsupported assertions.” Thus, their reputations would be smeared if their names were not permanently redacted. The court agreed.

Had all the priests in Pennsylvania who were named in the report taken the same position as the plaintiffs—none were given a realistic chance to rebut the charges (many were dead)—the grand jury report would have imploded.

This was a sweet victory for priests’ rights. It was

enormously gratifying that we played a role.

Less than a week before Christmas, the Illinois Attorney General issued a report on the Catholic clergy. Lisa Madigan said her probe was inspired by the Pennsylvania grand jury report that was released in August. She did not explain why she did not launch an investigation of the Illinois public schools following an incredible story in June by the *Chicago Tribune* on rampant sexual abuse in Chicago's public schools going on in 2018.

Nor did Madigan explain why she found fault with the way Church officials defined "credible" and "substantiated" accusations. On what grounds did her office make such determinations? She never identified what specific cases her office found where allegations should have been deemed "credible" or "substantiated." In other words, her office failed to *substantiate its claims*.

In early December, Tom Perez, the chairman of the Democratic National Committee, spoke to a liberal gathering in Washington, D.C., and proceeded to berate Christians. He said Democrats have a hard time getting their message across when millions get their political cues from

"Fox News, their NRA newsletter, and the pulpit on Sunday."

Perez unloaded on the clergy and the faithful, making a veiled stab at President Trump. "That person on the pulpit is saying, 'ignore everything else that this person is doing. We have to focus on one issue of *Roe v. Wade*.' And people buy it because that's their only source." He never apologized for insulting the intelligence of Christians.

Christmas continues to be the focus of the ongoing culture war, and 2018 was no different.

We erected our life-size nativity scene in Central Park, as we have for over two decades. We also took this opportunity to

make it a teaching moment: it is not unconstitutional to place religious symbols on public property unadorned by secular symbols *if* the spot is regarded as a public forum, open to artists, musicians, and others.

We called attention to places such as Rehoboth, Delaware which banned a nativity scene from being displayed in its Bandstand: it is a public forum and can allow religious symbols. The mayor caught flack from the community after we weighed in against him.

Some public schools continued to war on Christmas, most spectacularly Manchester Elementary School, which is part of the Elkhorn Public Schools in Nebraska. School officials banned displays of Santa Claus, Christmas trees, Christmas songs, the colors red and green, and candy canes. They were sued and the plaintiffs won.

The year 2018 proved to be a tough one for the Catholic Church. We are happy to say, however, that we had our fair share of victories. That is something all our members can be proud of, for without them, none of this would have happened.