

CATHOLIC LEAGUE FOR RELIGIOUS AND CIVIL RIGHTS 2020 YEAR IN REVIEW

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Bill Donohue

When I became president and CEO of the Catholic League in 1993, the lion's share of anti-Catholic bigotry stemmed from the entertainment industry and the media. Fast forward to today and we find that the primary source of anti-Catholicism is government.

In other words, we are regressing. It is one thing to be disparaged, even viciously so; it is quite another to be discriminated against.

The first serious discriminatory act of the year took place in Utah.

Utah Rep. Angela Romero, a Democrat, sponsored a bill that would have gutted the seal of confession. She said it was necessary because priests learn of the sexual abuse of minors in confession and do not report it to the authorities.

On January 13, I wrote Romero a letter asking her two questions. She maintained that sexual abusers confide to priests in the confessional about the nature of their crimes, and yet nothing ever comes of it. I asked her to identify just one perpetrator who ever made such a claim. She could not.

She could not answer my other question either. I wanted to know why she was seeking to breach the confidentiality of the priest-penitent privilege but showed zero interest in busting privileges afforded lawyer-client and psychologist-patient

relationships. Don't they learn of sexual abuse behind closed doors?

We asked our email subscribers to contact the Utah Speaker of the House, Rep. Brad Wilson, seeking his help in opposing this bill. He publicly said he did not support it. Rep. Romero huffed and puffed, saying she would go forward with her bill. In the end, she did not. Our supporters overwhelmed her fellow lawmakers with their objections.

Almost all of those whom we seek to help are from the United States, but there are exceptions. The most notable one for us in 2020 was Australian Cardinal George Pell. After years of being dragged through the courts for crimes he never committed, he was finally exonerated on April 6 when Australia's High Court unanimously overturned his conviction on five counts. The whole controversy was a sham from the very beginning.

I was proud to tell the media of our role. Starting on March 12, 2013, we issued 24 news releases in our defense of the beleaguered cardinal. Our statements to the media were widely distributed in Australia and the United States. "This will go down in history as one of the most egregious instances of injustice ever visited upon a high-ranking member of the Catholic clergy," I said.

In the United States, New York Archbishop Cardinal Timothy Dolan was the target of one of the most unprincipled and well-orchestrated attacks against a bishop to surface in many years. His offense? He said nice things about President Donald Trump in a conference call.

We wasted no time taking on the bullies. From the *National Catholic Reporter* to the George Soros-funded Faith in Public Life, we identified and confronted Dolan's foes. They were not interested in disagreeing with him. No, they sought to shut him up. They failed.

On March 2, we received good news. The Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled that it would review a Superior Court decision in a case involving the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown. In 2019, we entered an amicus brief in defense of the diocese.

The question before the court was whether a grand jury could decide whether the statute of limitations starts at the time of the injury (which is typical) or, as the plaintiff sought in this case, at the time when she was awakened to the gravity of her alleged victimization.

Renee A. Rice said she was molested 40 years ago by a priest; he denies it outright. She further maintains that two bishops tried to cover it up, even though the diocese sent her a letter *10 years before her lawsuit*, encouraging her to come forward about her alleged abuse. Her attorneys said the clock determining the start of the statute of limitations should begin in 2018, at the time of the grand jury report on clergy sexual abuse. That is when it occurred to her, they contended, that she was a victim.

When the case was formally taken up by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, we filed another amicus brief, represented once again by lawyers from the Jones Day firm in Pittsburgh. Oral arguments were heard on October 20.

One of the most left-wing radicals in Congress is Rep. Rashida Tlaib. On March 16, I wrote to Rep. Ted Deutch, head of the House Committee on Ethics, asking that the Committee issue a letter of reprimand to the Palestinian extremist.

The day before, Tlaib retweeted a post from activist David Hogg that read, "Don't let this administration address COVID-19 like our national gun violence epidemic. F**k a National day of prayer, we need immediate comprehensive action." [Both tweets did not use asterisks.]

Tlaib has a history of using filthy language, so what she said was not a shocker. Still, she is a sitting congresswoman and

deserved to be sanctioned. We did not have any illusion about her being reprimanded—Congress is not good about levying penalties against their own—but we knew our request would become part of her personnel file, so if she were to act up again, it would raise the chances of her being sanctioned.

We know Tlaib got stung: after getting bombarded with emails from our supporters, she tried to walk back her obscene assault. Message delivered.

Another left-wing extremist is Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC). I wrote to her on August 3rd when she lashed out, without provocation, at Father Damien, the 19th century priest who gave his life serving lepers on the Hawaiian island of Molokai. Referring to a statue of him in the U.S. Capitol, AOC said, “This is what patriarchy and white supremacist culture looks like!”

“Your remarks evince an offensive ethnocentrism,” I said to the New York congresswoman. “You disrespected the people of Hawaii: It is they who hold Father Damien in high regard. You should be careful not to judge a people’s culture and history through your own provincial lens.”

Once again, our email subscribers chimed in, letting AOC know what they thought about her assault on this heroic priest.

In 2017, we came to the aid of Notre Dame Law School professor Amy Coney Barrett. She was nominated by President Trump for a seat on an appellate court. The outburst of anti-Catholicism that she experienced was a disgraceful moment in American history.

We are happy to report that our relentless defense of Barrett, and our effort to shame those who unjustly attacked her, paid off. We have evidence that our news releases on those who were maligning her were read by senate staffers. So when she was nominated to be on the Supreme Court in 2020, we were ready to do battle again.

We predicted that Barrett would not have to endure the kind of barrage against her that she experienced in 2017. We were right. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, who accused Barrett of being driven by Catholic dogma, pulled back this time, making sure not to make any more anti-Catholic remarks. Ditto for Sen. Dick Durbin. He had made Catholic-baiting comments when Barrett was up for the appellate seat. He tamed himself this time around.

In our defense of Barrett, we issued 10 news releases, garnering 32 media hits, putting everyone on notice. We also mobilized Catholics to contact Senator Charles Grassley, who chaired the Senate Judiciary Committee in 2017; they did so in droves, as Grassley himself admitted. It was too close to the election to go down this road again.

Barrett handled herself well, disarming her critics with her brilliance and poise. We were only too happy to defend her once again on TV and radio, and in granting interviews to newspapers and internet sources.

The biggest story of the year outside of the presidential race was Covid-19. We never expected to be drawn into this health crisis, but we were. Many cities and states were run by mayors and governors who abused their office, overreaching their authority. While emergency situations beckon emergency decrees, the uneven, and indeed unjust, application of shutdowns in many parts of the country were cause for grave concern.

On March 27, at the beginning of the shutdowns, I enunciated the Catholic League's position. "Whenever religious liberty collides with public health, the government is obliged to put the least restrictive measures on religion." A few weeks later, we supported U.S. District Judge Justin Walker when he invoked a temporary restraining order blocking Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer's ban on drive-in church services.

The Catholic League was instrumental in a big victory that involved attempts to justify curtailment of the Eucharist; the abridgements were purportedly invoked because of public health concerns. At the end of May, Howard County Maryland Executive Calvin Bell announced that he was going to ban “the consumption of food or beverage of any kind before, during, or after religious services, including food or beverage that would typically be consumed as part of a religious service.” This would, in effect, ban the distribution of sacramental wine at Mass.

We immediately alerted our email subscribers, noting that this was an issue of monumental importance, one that should trigger a strong response from Catholics no matter where they lived. Our supporters came through, overwhelming County officials. I know this because I received a phone call from Scott Peterson, spokesman for the County. He said he was “bombarded” with letters of protest. The ban was withdrawn.

It wasn't just the initial reaction of government officials that proved to be worrisome: the ACLU got into the act supporting the shutdowns. This appeared strange given the organization's defense of individual rights and its historic disregard for any other issue, whether it be national security or civil unrest. Yet as I have shown in two books and many articles on the ACLU, it is anything but a principled organization. I issued a lengthy analysis of its hypocritical handling of the legal issues attendant to the shutdowns.

The ACLU took advantage of Covid-19 by suing California Gov. Gavin Newsom for not letting convicted felons out of prison. This was hardly a shocker: the civil libertarians have long been opposed to prisons. It also rallied to the defense of protestors who violated social distancing rules, making an exception to its newly found interest in public health.

Matters came to a head when New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo and New York City Mayor de Blasio okayed mobs taking to the streets to

protest racial injustice—often engaging in violence—while putting restrictions on houses of worship. At the end of June, U.S. District Court Judge Gary Sharpe issued a preliminary injunction, saying they exceeded their authority. He also chided them for “encouraging what they knew was a flagrant disregard for the outdoor limits and social distancing rules.”

At the end of the year, Cuomo put more restrictions on certain neighborhoods in Brooklyn. His latest edict put severe limits on the number of people who could attend churches or synagogues. He admitted that his occupancy limits would be “most impactful on houses of worship.” That was not too smart. The U.S. Supreme Court informed him that he exceeded his authority and that his order could not be implemented, pending a review by the 2nd Circuit Court of Appeals.

The high court did the same thing to California Gov. Gavin Newsom a week later. His draconian restrictions were put on hold while the district judge who approved his order reviewed the ruling against Cuomo. These were two key victories for religious liberty, and Justice Amy Coney Barrett proved to be decisive in both cases.

The riots that swept the nation following the death of George Floyd, a black man who had a run-in with Minneapolis police, proved beyond a doubt that the expressed public health concerns of government authorities—social distancing must always be practiced—were politically expedient. No one who protested faced any penalty for flouting Covid-19 protocols. Yet church services were curtailed in the name of safety.

What Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan called “The Summer of Love” turned out to be “The Summer of Hate.” The hate mongers voiced their hatred of America and of Western civilization, tearing down iconic statues on public property. They also targeted churches, many of which were Catholic. It kept the Catholic League busy seeking to answer the deluge of media calls. We detailed the damage that was done.

Bibles were burned, churches were torched, schools were trashed, and Catholic graves were defaced. The vandals also destroyed statues of Saint Junípero Serra, the 18th-century missionary priest who did more to secure human rights for Indians than anyone else. We contacted the District Attorney of Marin County supporting a plea by San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone asking that the six vandals who toppled the statue of Saint Serra in San Rafael on October 12 be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

Our first victory of the year was won against a media outlet. It took place on January 3rd when we squeezed an apology from the CBS affiliate in St. Petersburg, Florida, WTSP. It falsely claimed that a Sarasota Catholic bishop had been charged with sexually abusing a child. The bishop was Protestant. We jumped on this issue immediately, and our protest resulted in an apology.

Trevor Noah's "The Daily Shows" (like Jon Stewart before him) is a hotbed of anti-Catholic bigotry. He got so bad in 2020 that it impelled us to contact the board of directors of ViacomCBS, the parent company of his Comedy Central show. Here is a sample of what I wrote on May 20. "Noah is cruel. You have a bigot in your employ. The evidence that is being forwarded to you [we provided extensive documentation of his attacks] is conclusive. You can do something about it. Please do."

Did the memo to the board work? Noah certainly zipped it for the rest of the year.

Media bias is most often reflected in the content of their stories. But sometimes there are acts of omission that reflect bias. Such was the case when the bishops' conference released the latest data on clergy sexual abuse in late June.

It was revealed that during the period July 1, 2018 – June 30, 2019, 37 allegations had been made by current minors against

almost 50,000 priests and deacons. During this time, 8 of the allegations were substantiated, 7 were unsubstantiated, 6 were unable to be proven, 12 were still being investigated, 3 were referred to religious orders, and 1 was referred to another diocese.

This means that .016% of the allegations made could be substantiated. To put it differently, 99.98% of priests and deacons (there are twice as many priests) did not have a substantiated accusation made against them. The media failed to report this. Worse, those who prepared the document and shared the data failed to do the computation. They always do.

Education is another source of anti-Catholicism, especially these days. We scored a victory, which was shared with others, when our fight against public control of private schools in New York State won. We beat back an initiative that would have allowed the public school industry the right to police Catholic and other private schools. We fought this in 2018 and 2019, outlining to state education officials our objections. In 2020, the power grab was shelved.

Teaching students to hate America is very popular among radical educators. There is nothing new about this, save for the fact that the desire to do so has penetrated the textbooks used by elementary and secondary students, not just college students. Matters got worse when the *New York Times* rolled out its "1619 Project," a curriculum-centered program that teaches students how racist America is.

Students learn that America was not founded in 1776 in a fight for liberty; they learn it was founded in 1619 in a fight for slavery. Of course, they learn that Christians were responsible for slavery.

We struck back. We sent to every school district that had adopted the "1619 Project" a detailed history of the racist legacy of the *New York Times*. The family that started the

newspaper were slave owners. The racist commentary and the racist workplace of the *Times* were amply cited. We told the educators who received our work on this issue that they had a moral obligation to tell their students the truth about the racist origins and developments of the “newspaper of record.”

Filipe Castro, a Texas A&M University professor, earned the ire of the Catholic League. He posted some of the most obscene and patently anti-Catholic comments on social media, and apparently was going to get away with it. We jumped on this issue, publishing his vicious assaults—they included physical threats against Catholics—sending our evidence to the media, university officials, the Board of Regents, the campus newspaper, the governor and his staff, the regional accrediting body, and various congressional and state lawmakers.

We heard from students, alumni, the campus newspaper, the head of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission, and the media. Castro would not talk to anyone, but we sure did. At the very least, his behavior is now part of his public record.

In November, with funds raised by our members, we were scheduled to have the American Association of Superintendents and Administrators send an eblast to its list of subscribers across the nation. The digital post, which I wrote, alerted superintendents to what is acceptable and what is not acceptable regarding Christmas celebrations in the schools.

It was titled, “No Need to Cancel Christmas.” We made the case that while Christianity cannot be promoted, that does not mean that schools are required to censor every expression of Christmas. “No federal court has ever ruled that Christmas must be censored in the schools.”

But then, at the last minute, the officials at this organization backed out of the deal. Of the six education

organizations that we contacted, all but one either rejected our ad or did not get back to us (the one that agreed to go with it was a quarterly, making the timing impractical).

Two weeks before Christmas we scored an important victory. An upstate New York county government denied the local Knights of Columbus Council the right to display a nativity scene outside the office building. Our intervention led to it being displayed inside the building next to a menorah and Christmas tree.

The year ended on a worrisome note. We had plenty of reasons to be concerned about the kinds of religious liberty policies that President Joe Biden might promote. After all, it was the Obama-Biden administration that gave us the Health and Human Services mandate forcing Catholic entities such as the Little Sisters of the Poor to pay for abortion-inducing drugs in their healthcare plan.

While President Trump alienated many people with his persona, he did more to protect and advance religious liberty than any president in American history. What Biden will do remains to be seen, but from what he has pledged to do—pushing for legislation that would roll back the religious exemptions afforded by Trump—the assault on religious liberty is likely to quicken. No matter, the Catholic League will be up to the battle.