

# CELEB DEFENSE LAWYERS MAKE GOOD POINTS

Catholic League president Bill Donohue comments on celebrity lawyers and the cogent points they make:

One does not have to like Bill Cosby or Harvey Weinstein (I fought with the latter for decades) to like what their lawyers are saying in their defense. There are some lines of defense that are not only persuasive, they have direct application to accused priests.

As everyone knows, the #MeToo movement has had its sights set on Cosby and Weinstein from the beginning. Given that both men are high profile celebrities who have been accused of serial sexual offenses, this is understandable. But that doesn't mean that everything done in the name of this cause is justified.

Cosby's lawyers recently appealed his conviction for sexual assault to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. In their filing, his lawyers made a veiled reference to the #MeToo movement. "Cases exist in which the outcomes were deeply influenced by public panic fueled by the nature of the allegations pledged, the media, and other special interest groups. The criminal justice system teeters on a dangerous precipice in such cases."

Andrew Wyatt, Cosby's spokesman, was more specific. He raised concerns about "the impact of #MeToo hysteria on the bedrock principles of our criminal justice system."

The "public panic" cited by the lawyers is what sociologists call a "moral panic." It refers to an irrational reaction to alleged offenses, one that yields a poisoned environment in which to adjudicate them. There is little doubt that the #MeToo movement has set off alarms that threaten to allow emotion to override reason in dealing with alleged sexual

offenses, the result of which compromises the due process rights of the accused.

Donna Rotunno is Weinstein's defense lawyer. She was asked about the #MeToo movement.

"If we have 500 positives that come from a movement, but the one negative is that it strips you of your right to due process and a fair trial, and the presumption of innocence, then to me, not one of those things can outweigh the one bad," she said. "We can have movements that strip us of our fundamental rights." Similarly, she said that this movement "allows the court of public opinion to take over the narrative" and "puts you in a position where you're stripped of your rights."

What about the women accusers? "Yes, he's a powerful guy. But I think that because he's a powerful guy, they would use him and use him and use him for anything they could." When asked if all women accusers should be believed, Rotunno answered, "I believe women who I believe the facts and evidence support their cases, but I think it's very dangerous to believe all women without looking at the back story—the rest of the evidence."

Everything that these lawyers have said about their clients is true of accused priests these days. Even more so.

A moral panic has indeed arisen in cases of clergy sexual abuse. It is fed by a hostile media, late-night talk-show hosts on TV, cable outlets like HBO, and others. Old cases of abuse are presented as if they are new, leaving the false impression that the scandal is ongoing. Pernicious generalizations about priests—and sick jokes—are made with abandon. Movies spread lies about the Catholic hierarchy. And so on.

This has less to do with the #MeToo movement than it does with vintage anti-Catholicism. It is no secret that the cultural

elites harbor an animus against Catholicism. These kinds of atmospherics make it difficult for accused priests to get a fair trial. Add to this the cherry picking of accused priests by state attorney generals, and the table is set for conviction.

What Weinstein's lawyer says about women accusers is certainly applicable to priest accusers. Some are telling the truth but others are lying through their teeth, seeking revenge against an institution they despise. And just as Weinstein is a "powerful guy" who is easily exploited because of who he is, the Catholic Church is a "powerful" institution that is also easily exploited.

It would do the Catholic Church wonders if more aggressive attorneys such as those employed by Cosby and Weinstein were hired. No priest should be a sitting duck for rapacious victims' lawyers. I might add that Rotunno is a Chicago lawyer who went to a Catholic college.