

CELEBRITY CRUISES STIFFS CATHOLICS

Recently we learned that Celebrity Cruises announced that at the beginning of this year it would no longer have priests on board to celebrate daily and Sunday Masses. We immediately followed up by questioning the cruise line about its new policy. Celebrity replied to our inquiry by saying, "Out of respect for our guests of all religious faiths, Celebrity has chosen to align the religious services provided for Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Interdenominational faiths effective January 4, 2010." It added that religious services would be provided for "the major High Holy Holidays of each respective faith."

What this statement failed to note is the reason for the new policy. The following is an excerpt from a letter Celebrity sent to Catholic priests affected by the change in policy: "While we do meet the needs of many guests onboard by supplying a priest, we have recently encountered a great deal of negative feedback pertaining to the 'selective' support of one particular religion/faith. After many internal discussions, external research, and marketing investigations, Celebrity Cruises will only place Roman Catholic Priests on sailings that take place over the Easter and Christmas holiday."

In other words, because some anti-Catholics objected to daily Mass onboard the ship, Celebrity Cruises threw the priests—and the lay Catholic men and women with them—overboard. Instead of standing on principle and telling those generating the "negative feedback" that no one is forced to attend Mass, and that tolerance demands respect for religious freedom, officials at Celebrity Cruises decided to yield to the bigots.

Celebrity spokeswoman Liz Jakeway defended the new policy by

distorting the truth of what actually occurred. She said that the new policy is “built around our guests’ feedback and their suggestion that we ‘level the playing field.’” There was feedback alright, but it was hardly amicable. She failed to mention that Celebrity let bigotry—not parity—drive its new policy.

Similarly, one would never have known the truth of what happened by reading Cathy Lynn Grossman’s column in the January 26 *USA Today*. She made it sound as if Catholics had been cut a deal by Celebrity at the expense of others. She reported that some “were annoyed that Catholic clergy had ever been favored over other faiths that have daily or weekly prayers.” But there was no favoritism: there is a profound difference between non-Catholic clergy not requesting daily religious services and their being denied by Celebrity.

If Celebrity and its cheering section can’t defend the new policy on principle, then it should at least not play fast and loose with the facts. We understand the need for corporate damage control, but there is no place for dishonesty. We advised all Catholics to shop around the next time they plan on taking a cruise, but not to waste their time checking out Celebrity Cruises.