

CONFRONTING THE SKEPTICS

The editor of a Pennsylvania newspaper recently called to protest my letter objecting to an anti-Catholic cartoon. Nothing noteworthy about that. But what is worth mentioning was his tone. He could not for the life of him understand why there was a need for an organization like the Catholic League. He spoke for many when he said that, aside from a few extreme instances, there was very little anti-Catholicism in the country. What the league saw as examples of bigotry, he contended, were nothing more than criticisms against the Church.

Now try contrasting this bigotry suffered by other segments of our society. The terms racist, sexist and homophobic are bandied about so recklessly that those who ask for proof are often seen as part of the problem. It's as though declarations of bigotry are evidence enough. Just consider how many people think that merely asking Hillary Clinton to testify before a grand jury is proof positive that there is sexism in the land.

But when it comes to the Catholic Church, that's a different story. When the Catholic League charges that the Church has been defamed, we are expected to provide mountains of evidence and tons of testimony, all of which are designed to persuade the skeptics to our cause. Our complaint, to be clear about this, is not that we should be forced to verify our charges, it is simply that there is a double standard at work. We have to pass a rigorous test while others are given a free pass.

A syndicated columnist from the South takes it a step further. "If Ralph Nader criticizes industry," he asks, "is he bashing it? If an artist caricatures an ineffective and misdirected school board, is he bashing education? If today's media react to the situation in the churches [rackets and scandals] with news features, editorial comment, sharp-edged cartoons, what we're witnessing is honest reporting and commentary, not

bashing.”

The columnist is right, though his remarks are disingenuous. Surely there is a difference between reporting on a scandal and fanning the flames of discontent. The latter is accomplished, in part, when gross generalizations are made about an entire class of people or organization. It is one thing to publish news accounts of a clergyman gone astray, quite another to take a stab at the Church while doing so. If superiors covered up a misdeed, they should be exposed, but attempts to condemn a 2000 year old institution—which has very clear-cut rules against the immoral behavior—should be resisted by all responsible editors.

Another popular comment, often made by the same persons, is that the Catholic Church should be able to defend itself. It is a doubly dumb statement: a) it presupposes that the Church is incapable of self-defense and b) it presumes that the laity are not part of the Church.

The Catholic Church, like all other organizations under attack, can use allies, and that is what the Catholic League is—an ally of the Church. As lay men and women we have every right to protect our Church, and indeed we carry a moral obligation to do so. We are needed not so much because the clergy can't do the job, but because as lay people we are afforded greater latitude in choosing the right means of redress. Besides, does anyone complain that there should be no Anti-Defamation League for Jews on the grounds that rabbis are sufficient to the task?

There is another dimension at work here as well. Some people are so angry with the Catholic Church (many are ex-Catholics) that they simply deny the existence of Catholic bashing. These same persons would be horrified at the suggestion that their denial of anti-Catholicism is rooted in their own bigotry, but the facts speak otherwise. When charges of racism, sexism and homophobia are casually and routinely leveled at the Church,

with nothing to back up the claims other than sheer emotion, something quite telling is being revealed.

Much of what the Catholic League is complaining about could be resolved rather quickly, if only the skeptics would listen. Our complaint boils down to this: we want a level playing field. And until we get one, we will continue to do our job.