

CONGRESSIONAL STAFFER DISCIPLINED AFTER LEAGUE PROTEST

In mid-December, B.J. Rudell, a staffer for Congressman Bob Clement of Nashville, Tennessee, posted via e-mail and the Internet an offensive statement about the pope. In *The Hotline: Daily Briefing on American Politics*, Rudell submitted a list of the "Top Ten Surprising Confessions Made by the Pope." Included in this "humorous" list were such comments as "Stopped sending alimony checks" and "Scratches himself during prayers." The most offensive remark was listed by Rudell himself as #1: "His imaginary friend is Jewish."

When a staffer from the Catholic League contacted Rudell about this matter, he argued that this was a free speech issue. He also maintained that his statements were not offensive because they "passed his criteria."

The Catholic League sent the following statement to the press about this incident:

"B.J. Rudell believes that he has emptied the discussion of his statement on the pope by citing his First Amendment right to free speech. However, the Catholic League has free speech rights, too, and we choose to exercise that right by calling for his dismissal: we are demanding that Congressman Clement fire Mr. Rudell.

"To suggest that Pope John Paul II, who has done more to foster better relations between Catholics and Jews than virtually anyone alive, is somehow in need of imagining that he has a Jewish friend, is scurrilous. That this comment was made the week before Christmas shows a level of insensitivity to Catholics that makes Mr. Rudell unfit for public service. Even worse is his obstinacy when challenged.

“The Catholic League hopes that Congressman Clement has stronger criteria for judging offensiveness than his staffer, B.J. Rudell. If so, we expect it won’t be long before Mr. Rudell is given his walking papers.”

The good news is that upon learning of this incident, Congressman Bob Clement acted swiftly and fairly. He wrote a letter on December 23, the same day of the Catholic League news release and the same day that Rep. Clement was sent a letter from William Donohue.

In his letter, Rep. Clement said that “The employees actions were unauthorized, offensive and inappropriate. He has been formally reprimanded in writing and suspended without pay pending further review and possible further disciplinary action.”

On Christmas eve, Dr. Donohue spoke to Congressman Clement in his home in Nashville, Tennessee; Rep. Clement was very apologetic.

The Catholic League is very pleased with the timely and ethical response of Congressman Bob Clement.
