

CULT GURU BUSTED DURING HOLY WEEK

Catholic League president Bill Donohue comments on the arrest of Keith Raniere:

Holy Week is a week of atonement for Christians, but this year it has special meaning for Keith Raniere as well: the cult guru, who exploited his women followers, was arrested by the FBI in Mexico on March 26 on charges of sex trafficking and forced labor. On March 27, the FBI raided the home of his sidekick, Nancy Salzman, in upstate New York.

Raniere, known to his minions as “The Vanguard,” ran a master-slave operation with vulnerable and morally confused women. He had sex with them over and over again, took photos and videos of them, and had one of his female workers use hot irons to brand his initials on the stomach of his woman victims, just below their pant line; it took about 30 minutes for this to be done. But not all his victims were adults: some were girls in their subteen and teenage years.

“During the branding ceremonies,” one complainant told CBS News, “slaves were required to be fully naked, and the master would order one slave to film while the other held down the slave being branded.”

Who was Raniere? According to the *Niagara Falls Reporter*, he was a boy genius who was able to speak in full sentences at age one, “taught himself high-school math in 19 hours when he was 12 and completed three years of college math and computer-language by the age of 13.” He graduated from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 1982, majoring in physics, math and biology. In 1989, he made the Guinness Book of World Records for his stunning IQ, which ranged between 188 and 194.

Raniere was also a monster. He founded a self-improvement

organization called NXIVM (pronounced Nex-ee-um). Originally from Brooklyn, he anchored his master-slave operation outside of Albany. The philosophical basis of his cult was drawn from many sources, including Scientology, Buddhism, Ericksonian hypnosis, humanism, and a smattering of New Age religions.

In 1990, Ranieri was introduced to a 12-year-old girl by her mother, who had recently divorced. The mother called the cult guru "an Einstein," and agreed to have her daughter tutored by him. He said he would teach her algebra and Latin. Instead, he raped her. He had sex with the girl, still wearing braces, in his townhouse and in the empty offices of his company, Consumers' Buyline. He also raped her in an elevator and in a broom closet. All total, he violated her about 60 times.

Ranieri was experienced in rape. In 1984, when he was 24, he met Gina Melita, a 15-year-old, whom he befriended. The Albany *Times-Union*, which has done the best work on "The Vanguard," described what happened. "He took her virginity in a dark room, her T-shirt flecked with blood. She told him it was painful, yet a short time later, he wanted more. During their four-month relationship, he hounded the 135-pound girl to lose weight and urged her to keep their relationship secret from her mother."

The adult women drawn to Ranieri were invariably well educated and attractive. But their childhood experiences and adult relationships were troubled, leaving them distraught and ripe for abuse. He sought to own them, mentally and physically, requiring them to sign confidentiality agreements, which they did.

Some of his subjects were co-workers, such as Toni Natalie. A married woman raising an adopted son, Ranieri convinced her that her husband was having an affair. He invited her to attend his childhood sexuality class, where he told his students that it was not uncommon for some tribes to perform oral sex on children to relieve their tensions.

Naturally, Ranieri raped her, and each time he did, she told the *Niagara Falls Reporter*, he said it “was harder on him than it was on me, that we needed to be together so that I could share in his energy, and that I needed to remain silent so as to not wake up my child who was sleeping in a nearby room.”

Ranieri was able to attract big time donors, none more famous than Sara and Clare Bronfman; their father, Edgar, made his fortune at Seagram. The daughters gave Ranieri \$100 million. They sincerely believed that their calling in life was to create world peace, turning to “The Vanguard” to lead the way.

The IQ wizard spent his life lying, cheating, ripping off his patrons, trashing women, and raping children. And he did it all in the name of ethical humanism.

It’s easy, too easy, to say Ranieri was a fraud. He was much more than that: He was a brilliant and evil tactician who knew how to manipulate the weak. His entire adult life was spent dabbling in one vacuous philosophical system after another, ultimately blending them into a self-serving cult.

At bottom, Ranieri thought that Jesus was irrelevant and that he had all the answers. Regrettably, he was able to convince these simple-minded and thoroughly confused women—all desperately looking for direction—that he could save them. But he saved no one. Instead, he not only savaged his followers mentally and physically, he made them pay for it, lavishly.

His day of atonement has arrived. That it has come during Holy Week is not only ironic, it is fraught with meaning. Sadly, it is one that likely escapes him.