


# Executive Summary

There are any number of activist organizations that, for one reason or another, find cause to bash the Catholic Church. Catholics for a Free Choice—which is neither Catholic nor  an organization—comes immediately to mind (we didn't bother to log their work because to do so would require a whole volume unto itself). But it is also true that there are organizations so constructed that it would seem unlikely to find expressions of Catholic-bashing.

Who would expect that an animal rights group would find cause to attack Catholicism? Yet that is exactly what People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) did when it took a cheap, and wholly inaccurate, stab at Boys Town, the famous home established by Father Flanagan. Simply because PETA didn't like the animal research being done at Boys Town, it took the occasion to make charges of priest pedophilia against the organization, charges that were as untrue as they were vicious.

Sometimes it happens that an ad hoc organization is formed for the purpose of making a statement against Catholics. This is what happened in San Diego in the period prior to Easter when the Atheist Coalition was established to essentially preempt the annual Christian services at Mount Soledad. By beating Christians to the punch, this motley crew of humanists, gays and witches was first in line to obtain a permit to conduct their little “sunrise service” at the foot of the cross atop the mountain. Their message was unmistakable.

When I am asked by reporters to identify an incident that is clearly anti-Catholic, I have no problem answering them. But perhaps the best piece of evidence I have is art: a picture, as the saying goes, is worth a thousand words. And that is particularly true of the art sponsored by the Tom of the Finland Foundation; it is also true of art found on college

campuses.

Last year, the Los Angeles-based Tom of the Finland Foundation awarded its grand prize for artistic expression to a drawing by Garilyn Brune: it showed a priest performing fellatio on Christ. Just as vulgar was the drawing by a Penn State student. Done for a class assignment, she crafted a huge bloody vagina shaped in grotto-like fashion, complete with human hair, with a statue of Our Blessed Mother placed within it. This "art" was left on display on campus grounds until Catholics complained and the student begrudgingly removed it. While the two episodes mentioned were far and away the worst examples of anti-Catholic art in 1996, the many others (some of which are listed in this report) that come to the attention of the league also merit concern. If there is a pattern here, it seems that attacks on the Blessed Virgin are increasing. Perhaps this has something to do with the veneration that Catholics bestow on a woman and the anger this causes those who brand the Church as anti-woman: Mary provides a target for those who hate the idea that a woman is given such high recognition by an allegedly misogynist institution.

As in past years, 1996 was no exception to the familiar pattern in some quarters of the media where anti-Catholicism raised its ugly head. Some of the attacks on the Church were quite noticeable, as in the return to television of the discredited minister, Jimmy Swaggart. Having previously been kicked off the air in Boston and Atlanta for his Catholic-bashing, Swaggart attempted to make a comeback in 1996 and wasted no time making stabs at the Catholic Church. While people like Swaggart are obviously a menace, what is even more perplexing is the gratuitousness of much of the anti-Catholicism that surfaces in the media. For example, when we read headlines about a thug who is identified as "an ex-altar boy," we must wonder why it is that such past identities are highlighted when it is clear that the altar boy status bears no relationship to the criminal activity that is being

reported. Has anyone ever seen a story that headlined the fact that a Jewish thug had previously been bar mitzvahed?

One does not expect to see stories about Catholicism in publications that discuss dogs, cars or the disabled. But not only was such the case in 1996, the stories all made gratuitous slams against the Church. The same is true of many sitcoms on TV: for reasons that have absolutely nothing to do with the plot, snide comments about Catholics pop out of nowhere. No other group in society is targeted for "humor" in this way, and no other group seems to be consistently on the minds of scriptwriters as Catholics.

Newspapers and magazines around the country had a field-day branding presidential hopeful Pat Buchanan a hothead, and many labeled him a bigot as well. While this aspect of media reporting is not a concern of the Catholic League's, attempts to tie Buchanan's alleged prejudices to his Jesuit training is. Again, it is the singling-out of Catholics in this manner that is disturbing. The Catholic League registered quite a protest against HBO last year for its production of *Priestly Sins: Sex and the Catholic Church*. The show was tabloid journalism in its worst form, provoking the league to call for a boycott of HBO. As we said at the time, "The film is classic propaganda, moving from anecdote to generalization." We also stressed the fact that nothing was reported about "false accusations, tarnished careers, greedy lawyers or obsequious therapists." It should be said, however, that a meeting with HBO officials showed they were willing to make some changes in the program and reacted professionally to our concerns.

The New York Times is particularly skittish about any movie that has Christian, and especially Catholic, undertones. When the *Hunchback of Notre Dame* was released, the newspaper found it necessary to warn readers that "The movie is sprinkled with Christian images, and there are specific references to God," thus placing Christian images and statements about God in the same category as profanity, violence and sexual situations.

The alarms went off at the Times when it learned that Care of the Spitfire Grill was produced by a Catholic organization. Reviewer Caryn James said it was "insidious" to promote Christian values, and that the Bible imagery used in the film was "slightly sinister" given the movie's Catholic sponsorship. The fact that Protestants and Jews also participated in the production of the movie was not sufficient to calm her fears: she explained that this doesn't "diminish the eerie sense that viewers are being proselytized without their knowledge." Significantly, not even Chick Publications has accused Catholics of engaging in such subliminal acrobatics.

The 1954 movie *Diabolique* was remade for a 1996 audience, and along with the modifications that might be expected was a heady injection of anti-Catholic statements. Hollywood observer Michael Medved has commented that the introduction of anti-Catholicism in remakes of old movies is not uncommon, making it obvious the agenda of some in that industry.

Then, of course, there were movies like *Primal Fear* and *Sleepers* that drew a loud protest from the Catholic League. We objected to the former movie because of its incredibly vicious portrayal of the Archbishop of Chicago, and we registered an even bigger objection to the latter film for its dishonesty in portraying the story as fact when there was no doubt that it was based on the creative imagination of author Lorenzo Carcaterra; the effect of this dishonesty was to promote a negative stereotype of Catholics and the Church.

Anti-Catholicism that emanates from government is exceptionally pernicious and that is why the Catholic League quickly jumped on what proved to be our number-one case of the year: we led a national outcry against Oregon District Attorney Doug Harclerod for his authorizing the surreptitious taping of a priest in a confessional. We were pleased to get an apology from the D.A. and a pledge never to do this again, and we were especially pleased with the cooperation of

Congressman Peter King for his willingness to introduce legislation forever barring this practice again.

When a congressional staffer posted “jokes” about the Pope on the congressional internet, we protested and won. When artist Andres Serrano, famous only for his dropping a crucifix into a jar of his own urine, was invited to be the keynote speaker at a Smithsonian event, we again protested. While it was too late to change the schedule of his appearance, our objections, together with Serrano’s behavior at the event, secured a promise from the Smithsonian that it is finished with this “artist.” We spent a lot of time addressing Catholic-bashing in the schools. Elementary school students were barred from drawing nativity scenes when making Christmas cards (our threatened lawsuit caused the school district to take remedial action) and Christmas was not celebrated to the same extent as Hanukkah, or even Kwanzaa. Even worse was the situation on college campuses. Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You, the play that was long-ago branded as anti-Catholic by Protestant and Jewish organizations (as well as Catholic groups), reappeared on many campuses. Mother Teresa was the subject of scorn at Johns Hopkins (it gave prominence to Christopher Hitchens’ cheap shots at the Albanian altruist), and fidelity to multiculturalism was used as an excuse to justify speakers that attacked Catholicism. The intellectual dishonesty that colored these events was evident to everyone save the bigots.

Finally, there are the phone messages and letters that the Catholic League gets that effectively settle the issue: anti-Catholicism is alive and well in the U.S. But we will endure, if for no other reason than our members—they are the greatest in the world.

**William A. Donohue, Ph.D.**

**President**