

Executive Summary



Every year there is an issue that absorbs a disproportionate amount of Catholic League resources, and in 2006 that issue clearly was “The Da Vinci Code.” While many organizations from several faith communities objected to the film, no group did more to get the word out about the movie’s lies than the Catholic League. It was only fitting, then, that the media would give us top billing in leading the protest.

When the book by Dan Brown came out in 2003, I told the Catholic League staff we would do nothing about it. That’s because I respect the right of novelists to take liberties with history. After all, it’s done all the time, and almost everyone knows the difference between a story concocted for entertainment and an historical account of some past event.

This doesn’t mean that we would never object to a novel, but it would have to be something altogether unusual for us to do so. Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* proved to be such a book.

As an author of non-fiction books and articles, I do not have the time to read novels. But when it was announced that there would be a film version of the book—released by Sony, directed by Ron Howard and starring Tom Hanks—I knew that I had to read it. What bothered me more than anything in the text of the novel was the page at the beginning of the book titled “Facts.” Listed were three “facts” that were demonstrably false and defamatory of the Catholic Church. This led me to write a letter to Ron Howard on March 18, 2005 asking him to put a disclaimer at the start of the film noting it as fiction. He never answered me.

A year later, on March 6, 2006, we opened our campaign against the movie in the pages of the *New York Times*. We reiterated our appeal for a disclaimer. Brown, we said, has been trying

to have it both ways for years: at times he says his book "is a work of fiction," and at other times he says it is based on "historical fact."

Brown's first "fact" alleged that a secret society, the Priory of Sion, kept alive the story that Jesus and Mary Magdalene married. But in fact, this tale was exposed as a hoax that was made up in the 1950s by an anti-Semitic Frenchman (who was sent to prison for fraud). The second "fact" alleged that a "religious sect" called Opus Dei was an evil organization, when in fact it is a lay group that calls Catholics to holiness in their daily lives. The third "fact" was the most malicious: it claimed that the book was based on historical documents that show how the divinity of Jesus was forged in the fourth century.

Everyone is free to believe what they want about Catholicism (or any other religion), and novelists are free to offer conjecture about the past. But no one has the right to defame another human being, or an institution, and then lie about his sources. As to the bigoted nature of the book/film, consider that it was John Calley, the movie's co-producer, who admitted that the film was "conservatively anti-Catholic." It would be unimaginable to conceive of a single producer in all of Hollywood who would brag about his association with a bigoted film, unless, of course, it was a Catholic-bashing flick.

When the movie opened May 19, we were pleased that we had succeeded in getting our message across—the film is a fable (even "60 Minutes" did a segment on it and concluded it was a hoax). However, we had no idea that it would prove to be such an artistic disaster, and that most reviewers would pan it as a bore. Forced to see it, I branded it "inane." Referring to my experience attending the movie on opening day, I commented that "at the end of the film there were three or four people who clapped, and three or four who hissed. Most just walked out in a zombie-like fashion, eerily mimicking the characters on the screen."

While we did not succeed in persuading Howard to begin the movie with a disclaimer, we did succeed in persuading the public that the movie was a fable. We also scored a number of full-fledged victories in 2006, the most prominent being our year-end triumph over NBC and pop singer Madonna.

Madonna has a long record of offending Christians, especially Catholics. So when we learned of her "Confessions" tour, we braced for her latest onslaught. This time, it was her "Mock Crucifixion" that offended us the most. To the tune "Live to Tell," she donned a crown of thorns while hanging from a mirrored cross. It was purely gratuitous, the stunt having nothing to do with the song. I wound up telling CNN's Paula Zahn that "If she tried it with some other religion, she may lose more than her shirt." I added, "She certainly won't bother the Muslims, and I think we all know why that is."

After making an initial protest, we chose not to criticize Madonna everywhere she went on tour. But when we learned that she was taking her concert to Rome, on a Sunday no less, we restarted our campaign. It was just a little too cute performing two miles from the Vatican. Fortunately, Protestants, Jews and Muslims also protested her act. I said on the "Today" show that to portray herself as Christ on the Cross was "the functional equivalent of taking a middle finger and sticking it right in the face of Christians."

The final straw happened when we learned that NBC-TV planned to air the entire Madonna concert on Thanksgiving eve. Some Protestant groups called for the concert to be cancelled. We took a different approach. We told NBC to go ahead and air the concert, save for the "Mock Crucifixion" part. In the event our request was not honored, we would launch a boycott, but it would not be a conventional one.

Brent Bozell, president of the Media Research Center, and I had written a letter to NBC chief Bob Wright explaining the boycott. We informed him that only one corporate sponsor would

be targeted (a boycott of all sponsors was unrealistic), and that it would be randomly chosen the day after the concert aired. That way no sponsor would know in advance to whom we would deliver our Christmas present. Moreover, several other allied organizations had pledged to join us in the boycott.

On October 19, NBC issued a statement saying it would cut the "Mock Crucifixion" segment from the concert. Madonna, who previously said through her spokeswoman that NBC must decide between airing the entire concert or nothing at all, accepted the new terms. In other words, we won, NBC lost and Madonna swallowed her pride and took the money and ran.

The year 2006 also saw the Catholic League widely commenting on the behavior of Muslims, and media reactions to it. In the first part of the year, the issue was Muslim protests over Danish cartoons portraying Muhammad. At the end of the year, the issue was the reaction to the pope's speech at Regensburg University and his trip to Turkey.

Our reaction to the Danish cartoons controversy was twofold: on the one hand, we denounced the cartoons as inflammatory, siding with the U.S., Britain and the Vatican; on the other hand, we denounced the incredible duplicity of the media—it chose not to offend Muslims by refusing to show the cartoons, while continuing to air television shows, movies, cartoons and commentary that were offensive to Catholics.

The *Washington Post* chastised the European newspapers for demonstrating their "hostility" to Muslims. The Los Angeles Times declared that it "must take great care not to offend," never explaining why it was necessary to adopt a new strategy—for Muslims, that is. Similarly, the *San Francisco Chronicle* said something we never heard before: it announced that "insulting or hurting certain groups" is wrong (the cartoons posted in the online edition of the newspaper frequently insult Catholics).

The *New York Times* managed to top this when it opined that it was wrong to publish “gratuitous assaults on religious symbols.” What made this so special is that on the same day that Michael Kimmelman wrote a splendid piece on the controversy (comparing the Catholic League’s non-violent protest of the “Sensation” exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1999 to the violent Muslim reaction of 2006), the *New York Times* printed the offensive Virgin Mary portrait with the elephant dung and porn on it that was the focal point of our museum protest!

In September, Pope Benedict XVI drew a firestorm of condemnation for dropping a line about a 14th century Byzantine emperor who called attention to Muhammad’s violence. The pope’s address at Regensburg warned of the dire consequences that follow when faith and reason are uncoupled. Ironically, as if to prove the pope’s point, Muslims in many parts of the world responded violently to his remarks. Churches were firebombed, the pope was burned in effigy, calls to kill the pontiff were voiced, and a nun was killed.

Yet in the eyes of so many in the media, the pope—not the terrorists—was to blame. The Catholic League, along with Jews Against Anti-Christian Defamation, took out an ad in the *Washington Times* defending the pope and criticizing Muslim violence. Dennis Prager said it best when he blasted those who continue to criticize Pope Pius XII for not speaking out about the Holocaust (the pope did, but that is another matter) and who were now criticizing Pope Benedict for “confronting the greatest evil of his time.” He concluded, “maybe it isn’t a pope’s confronting evil that concerns Pius’s critics, but simply defaming the Church.”

The flap over the Danish cartoons not only showed the duplicity of the media, it showed the hypocrisy of the academy. Most of the student newspapers on the nation’s college campuses choose not to reprint the cartoons, and when one of them did, a competing newspaper struck back by

attacking Catholics.

The March edition of the *Insurgent*, a University of Oregon student newspaper, contained a large graphic cartoon depicting a naked Jesus on the Cross with an erection; there was also a graphic titled "Resurrection," which showed a naked Jesus kissing a naked demon, both sporting erections. The entire issue was laced with downright insulting fare—there were several cartoons of Jesus (including Jesus crucified)—all of which were released during Lent. That this occurred at a state institution made it all the more disturbing.

This explosion of hate speech was a response to a decision reached by one of the *Insurgent's* rivals, the *Commentator*, to publish the 12 Danish cartoons that so inflamed the Muslim world. An *Insurgent* editorial explained that because the *Commentator* published depictions of Muhammad so as to "provoke dialogue," they had a right to trash Christians as a way of provoking dialogue.

It was the tepid response by university president Dave Frohnmayer that motivated us to contact every member of the Oregon legislature, the governor, the state's three Catholic bishops, the president of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, and the chancellor of the Oregon University System. While the damage could not be undone, we were pleased that concerned students on campus registered their outrage. We were also delighted that the national media picked up this story, much to the chagrin of Frohnmayer.

We had another battle in September on the campus of the University of Virginia when the *Cavalier Daily*, the student newspaper, printed anti-Christian cartoons. One showed a drawing of Jesus crucified on a mathematical graph with the inscription, "Christ on a Cartesian Coordinate Plane." The other showed the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus. "Mary...I don't mean to ruin this special moment," Joseph says, "but how did you get that bumpy rash?" To which Mary says, "I swear, it was

Immaculately Transmitted.”

Our protest included mentioning how the same student newspaper had previously apologized to gays when they were offended. So we demanded equal treatment. After being bombarded with 2,500 e-mails and 50 phone calls, the offensive comics were pulled from the website of the student newspaper and a statement of regret was issued.

We spent a lot of time last year, quite successfully, combating draconian state laws designed to punish the Catholic Church because of the sexual abuse scandal that was exposed in 2002. We had no problem with laws that promised uniform application, but when it was discovered that the Catholic Church was being singled out, we struck back. For example, when New Hampshire legislators entertained a bill that would violate the Sacrament of Reconciliation—as if priests routinely learn of molestation committed by a church employee in the confessional—we protested its unconstitutionality. We won.

Colorado was the site of the most tenacious battle in this area. Early in the year, three bills were considered that would suspend the statute of limitation for child sexual abuse lawsuits for two years. The bills, however, applied only to private entities; public schools were purposely given a pass, even though they have the worst documented record of the sexual abuse of minors of any institution in the nation. The Catholic League quickly came to the defense of Colorado’s three courageous bishops: Archbishop Charles Chaput, Bishop Michael Sheridan and Bishop Arthur Tafoya.

We wrote to every member of the Colorado legislature protesting the inequity of these bills. If all institutions were equally blanketed, we would have no problem, but by cherry picking the Catholic Church, the lawmakers were showing their bias. After a struggle, we prevailed and legislation was introduced that would give no institution a pass. Immediately,

the teachers unions got scared and let their representatives know of their concerns. Thus did these bills die a slow death.

We were active in the courts, as well. We like to team with the Thomas More Law Center whenever we can—it's a good tag team. Our most prominent case is still pending before the courts: we are protesting the prohibition of crèches in New York City public schools, citing religious discrimination (menorahs are allowed). When the year ended, the U.S. Supreme Court had yet to decide whether it will accept this case.

On April 4, 2006, the Thomas More Law Center sued the City of San Francisco, and two local officials, on behalf of the 6,000 members of the Catholic League who live there. The suit was brought after the San Francisco Board of Supervisors unanimously passed a resolution that amounted to government-sponsored hate speech against Catholics. Just because the Catholic Church supports the right of children to be raised by a father and mother, and not by various other combinations, the Board of Supervisors called the Church's teachings on adoption "hateful," "discriminatory," "insulting" and "callous," adding that it "shows a level of insensitivity and ignorance." The resolution also accused the Vatican of "meddling" in the affairs of San Francisco. We lost the first round; the case is on appeal.

We also joined with the Thomas More Law Center in a case dealing with partial-birth abortion. The suit supports the ban and challenges the euphemistic language used by the pro-abortion industry. The other case, being fought for us by the Washington, DC law firm of Winston & Strawn, challenges a New York law that requires religious charities' prescription drug plans to cover contraceptives.

Monitoring television shows is an on-going part of our work, and in 2006 the show that kept us the busiest was the ABC show "The View." Joy Behar has long been a problem, but things got worse when Rosie O'Donnell joined the panel. Whether slamming

conservative Christians, ridiculing Communion, or making blatantly untrue comments about Pope Benedict XVI, O'Donnell made it clear that she is an unrepentant bigot.

On a positive note, we were happy that NBC dropped the comedy/drama "The Book of Daniel" in the same month that it debuted. It was nothing more than a hit job on Christians.

A potential showdown between the Catholic League and the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) was avoided when a highly controversial issue that we addressed was quickly resolved. When word got out that a movie, "Facing the Giants," would be awarded a PG rating because it was "too religious," we contacted the MPAA and let our position be known. Indeed, we were relentless on this issue and did not let up until it became clear that no film was about to get a PG rating because of its "religious viewpoint."

Finally, the Christmas wars returned at the end of the year, though this time our side was on the upswing. Having defeated Wal-Mart the year before, the retail giant did a 180 and promoted "Merry Christmas" everywhere. Unlike previous years, when many Christians just complained, Christmas of 2006 was the year that many were mobilized. As a result, more victories were won last year than in previous years. We can lead, but we can't do it alone. And lead we did: an AP story in December featured the Catholic League as the organization that was front and center in the Christmas wars.

In sum, 2006 was an impressive year for the Catholic League. We don't win every battle, but even when we lose, we leave our mark. Most leaders, whether in the private or public sector, don't want to be confronted by advocacy organizations, especially civil rights groups. We don't start any of these fights, but we don't back off from them, either. There is too much at stake, and too many good Catholics who support us, not to fight to the finish.

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