

# HOLLYWOOD'S MORAL CODE

At the end of February, I will be going to Hollywood to score a few points for our side. Jeffrey Katzenberg, who is a partner with Steven Spielberg and David Geffen in DreamWorks, has invited me to preview a new movie, *Prince of Egypt*. Scheduled for release in November 1998, it is an animated film whose story is supposedly inspired by the Biblical story of Moses and the exodus from Egypt.

The day after the movie preview, I will attend a conference sponsored by the American Cinema Foundation and the UCLA Center For Communication Policy. At the conference will be leading representatives from virtually every field in the entertainment industry. The topic: Advocacy Groups and the Entertainment Industry.

So what do these guys want, anyway? Ostensibly, they want my input. Trust me—they'll get it.

Some Catholic League members may argue that Hollywood doesn't have a moral code. I disagree. They have one alright, but it doesn't include us.

Hollywood is awfully busy these days making movies and airing TV programs that don't offend large segments of the population. That would include African-Americans, Native Americans, Jews, gays, Asians, Hispanics and others. It doesn't include us.

When I was recently asked by a skeptical reporter what kinds of things the Catholic League complains about, I rattled off four TV shows in the past week that were downright offensive to Catholics. I then asked her to name any shows that disparaged blacks, Jews or gays lately. She couldn't cite one and conceded the point.

We're not included in Hollywood's moral code because a lot of

writers, producers and directors believe we have it coming to us. The Catholic Church, in their minds, is the greatest obstacle to the emancipation of women and homosexuals, hence the need to bash it. Never mind that no other religion venerates a woman the way Catholicism does or has an order of religious comprised totally of women. And never mind that the Church no more condemns homosexuals than it does heterosexuals: it is sodomy, as well as fornication and adultery, that the Church opposes.

But none of this matters because the ideologues have made up their minds. So why go to Hollywood? Because not everyone in Hollywood is a hopeless mental robot following the lead of the trend-setters in their midst. Some actually think, and they're the ones I want to get to.

Hollywood is now wrestling with a ratings system that would track a program's content as it bears on violence and sex. But why isn't there a V-chip for bigotry as well? The answer is that Hollywood doesn't think it needs one.

Not for a minute do I believe that the real reason why Hollywood doesn't have programs that offend the groups I've mentioned is because the creative-types are afraid of catching flack from them. That's secondary. The real reason is that such shows would offend their own moral code. And that is why Hollywood would think it bizarre to have a ratings system that clocked bigotry: they have done such a masterful job at self-censorship that they wouldn't think of bashing most groups, and they do not see as bigoted the bigoted material they serve up to us.

Hollywood is all about sending messages, some of which are direct and others which are subtle. Unlike the Hollywood of old, they don't make shows that feature smokers or treat Catholics reverentially. The new moral code has no tolerance for either smokers or Catholics. So there are taboos, after all.

In a recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation and Children Now, it was found that three out of four shows the major networks air during the so-called family hour (between 8 and 9 p.m.) contain some sexual content, and a typical hour contains eight sexual messages. What these groups did not measure was the number of times these sexual messages were juxtaposed with cracks about Catholicism.

The effect of these messages can be debated endlessly but what cannot be doubted is that they have *some* effect, otherwise advertisers wouldn't advertise. How the penchant for denigrating Catholics impacts on the Church is not certain, but the constant chipping away at its moral authority cannot be salutary, either for the institution or the society at large. That's why we need to fight back.

So these are some of the things I want to address. I just hope they spare me the goat cheese and white wine. I much prefer pizza and beer.