

# HOT BUTTON ISSUES MARK COLD WINTER

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This issue of *Catalyst* is not like any other. Normally, we run a series of articles that touch on anti-Catholicism and related issues. But this time we are featuring two very special items: "An Open Letter to the Jewish Community" and a Special Report, *Sexual Abuse in Social Context: Catholic Clergy and Other Professionals*. Both were published as separate documents and were mailed to a variety of prominent individuals and organizations. They are reprinted here so that all Catholic League members can read them.

The need for the latter report was occasioned by the release of two major studies conducted by John Jay College of Criminal Justice. One study was to focus on the abuse of minors by priests since 1950; the other was to address the causes and consequences of the scandal. Both of these studies were commissioned by the bishops when they met in Dallas in June 2002. Readers will recall what a frenzied environment that was—it turned into a ruckus where some unreflective judgments were made. Among them was the decision to authorize the John Jay studies.

It is always wrong to compare apples with oranges, but it is worse to examine data absent a comparative base. That is why I decided to tackle this issue headfirst. My goal was to learn the extent of this problem outside the confines of the priesthood.

What I found was quite interesting: youngsters are more likely to be molested in the home than anyplace else; the incidence of abuse is slightly higher among the Protestant clergy; and it is significantly higher among public school teachers. In

other words, the near exclusive media focus on priests is unwarranted and unfair.

This issue alone would have been enough to consume the attention of the Catholic League over the winter. But as it turned out, there was another hot button issue we were forced to deal with, namely the controversy over the Mel Gibson movie, "The Passion of the Christ."

During my tenure as president of the Catholic League, we have dealt with a number of very important issues. But nothing like the Gibson film. This movie represents the crystallization of the culture war in a way no other issue ever has. Moreover, it has managed to touch everyone from the pope to the paparazzi, jolting fan and foe alike.

Regarding the pope, contrary to what has been said, the Holy Father said of the movie, "It is as it was." But because some in the Vatican did not want the pope to appear to be issuing a formal endorsement of the film, they began to backtrack. Politics aside, the pope liked the film.

Abe Foxman of the ADL didn't like the film. In fact, he said the movie is anti-Semitic and may engender violence against Jews. A fundraising letter read, "Of great concern to the Anti-Defamation League is the possibility that individuals are more likely to be targets of attack, simply because they are 'different.'" It is Christians who Foxman fears the most: he says the film "is not being sold as a movie. It's being sold as a religious experience, as a pilgrimage, as a way back to faith." This is his worst nightmare—that Christians who left the faith may return.

As for Foxman's fear of Christian violence against Jews, he's talking nonsense. James Shapiro is a Columbia University professor who has written the definitive book on the subject of Passion Plays, *Oberammergau: The Troubling Story of the World's Most Famous Passion Play*. I recently asked him when

was the last time Jews were beaten up after a Passion Play. Aside from a Catholic convert in Nazi Germany who was attacked, we have to go back to the Middle Ages to find examples. And in the U.S., there is no record of violence against Jews following any Passion Play. In short, there is no need to call out the National Guard.

It is important in times like these not to forget that Jews are no more monolithic than Catholics—we come in all shapes, sizes, ideologies and temperaments. It is okay to disagree—even robustly—as long as it is done in a civil way. This was the spirit that brought Catholics and Jews together following the opening of the movie.

Rabbi Joseph Potasnik is the president of the New York Board of Rabbis. We have been friends for many years and, in fact, have appeared on TV in debates on the same side of the issue. It was his idea to keep relations between Catholics and Jews solid by agreeing to watch the movie on opening day and then hold a press conference afterwards. Prior to doing so we agreed—four rabbis, three priests and myself—to “10 Principles of Religious Understanding.”

The reason we came together was to show that Catholics and Jews can disagree about a film without ever impairing our common bond. This is what real friendship is all about. Now go watch the movie!