

# HOUSE CHAPLAIN ISSUE ERUPTS (AGAIN)

The controversy over the House Chaplain issue embroiled Washington for about a week, ending in a victory for the chaplain, a loss for Rep. Paul Ryan, and a surge of media attention for the Catholic League.

There was anti-Catholicism involved on at least two different levels, though we hasten to say that Ryan, who is a practicing Catholic, was not guilty of bigotry. That he botched the issue is not debatable, but that is not the same as being engaged in Catholic bashing. He was not. Here is how the controversy unfolded.

The resignation of Father Pat Conroy as House Chaplain came at the end of April. He had met with Ryan two weeks earlier, saying that Ryan had asked him to resign. It appears that Ryan felt Father Conroy was getting too political in his job. According to Rep. Gerry Connolly, a Catholic Democrat, "For a lot of members, the outrage is personal, and it's not about Catholicism."

That being the case, the Catholic League did not initially address this issue: anti-Catholicism had nothing to do with it. But then things changed.

Rep. Mark Walker, an ordained Baptist minister and a Republican, said he hoped the new House Chaplain would be somebody who "has adult children" and can "connect with the bulk of the body here." Bill Donohue told the media, "That obviously would preclude most Catholic priests since only a few are married."

The congressman then walked back his remark, saying he meant to say that whoever fills this post should "have experience in dealing with family issues."

This would not be a big issue if there were no history of anti-Catholicism among some Protestant congressmen. But there is.

In 1999-2000, Donohue got into a protracted fight with House Republicans when Father Timothy O'Brien, who was being considered for the post of House Chaplain, became the victim of a vicious smear campaign launched by some evangelicals; he would have been the first Catholic to assume the duties as House Chaplain. He was rejected by the House leadership though the issue remained unresolved.

The bullying of the Catholic League by some Republicans, led by House Speaker Dennis Hastert and House Majority Leader Dick Armey, was relentless. But we fought back and they lost. On March 23, 2000, Father Daniel P. Coughlin was named the first Catholic to become House Chaplain.

Donohue pointed out that Rep. Connolly was rightly upset with Rep. Walker's remark, branding it "anti-Catholic," but the former seminarian, he added, carried his own baggage into this debate.

In 2008, when Connolly was running for a congressional seat in Virginia, which he ultimately won, he was opposed by Keith Fimian, a Republican. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) accused Fimian of "rolling back women's rights." It cited as evidence that Fimian was a member of Legatus, an organization of Catholic CEOs.

This was a hit job. Legatus is an excellent Catholic organization founded and run by Tom Monaghan, who started Domino's Pizza. It has plenty of women members and zero history of misogyny.

When this unseemly attack on Fimian occurred, Donohue said that although Connolly was not responsible for the DCCC smear, he was the clear beneficiary of it, and should therefore "tell the DCCC to cease and desist with the Catholic bashing

immediately.” He never did.

We thought this issue was dying down when another expression of anti-Catholicism was reported. Ryan, feeling the heat from both Republicans and Democrats, reinstated Father Conroy as House Chaplain after the priest rescinded his resignation; Conroy had rethought his decision after consulting with friends. In his letter withdrawing his resignation, Conroy indicted Ryan’s chief of staff, Jonathan Burks.

Conroy said that Burks had told him, “Maybe it’s time that we had a chaplain that wasn’t Catholic.” This led Donohue to call upon Ryan to fire Burks. Burks said that his “recollection” of the conversation was different. That was a weak reply for an ostensibly innocent person to make.

Some friends of the Catholic League were upset that we weighed in against Ryan, who is a reliably pro-life voice in Washington. This misunderstands our mission: we fight defamation and discrimination against individual Catholics and the institutional Church, showing no partisanship to Republicans or Democrats. We are not the Catholic arm of either Party.

When asked by the Milwaukee *Journal Times* about this issue, Donohue said that Ryan should have come out quickly and cleared the air. “Quite frankly,” he said, “if Ryan would have come out with a plausible explanation [about Burks] that softens the charge and provides greater context, people like me would be satisfied. I understand people say things in the heat of the moment. All I am saying is the big guy [Ryan] has to speak.”

There is no role for anti-Catholicism in politics. This means that no priest should ever be disqualified for the House Chaplain position because he is celibate. It must also be said that there is no role for hypocrisy in dealing with such matters, or for a delayed response.