

# HUMOR AND BAD TASTE RECONSIDERED

There has always been humor and bad taste. Unfortunately, we not only have more bad taste than humor these days, we have a blurring of the lines between the two. To be exact, we have become so accustomed to bad taste that much of it frequently passes as humor.

Lots of people don't like Bill and Hillary. But what Don Imus did was bad taste—insulting the President and First Lady at a function they attended. The reaction of Don Imus and his supporters was predictable: this is how radio talk show hosts earn their living, ergo, no one has a right to complain. Now if that's true, then doesn't that tell us something about the status of our culture?

The increase in bad taste is a function of our willingness to accept it. Quite simply, we get more of it because we are prepared to tolerate more of it. It's also the case that many people no longer know what's in good taste, the result being that bad taste is allowed to flourish. Consider, for example, *Mad* magazine.

When I was a kid, I loved reading *Mad*. To be sure, it was always a bit irreverent, but even in those days few complained that it was vulgar or insulting. No more. What was once a smart-alecky comic book has now become a trashy rag. Not content to poke fun at the conventional, it has become an organ that assaults the conventional. This signals a change in our culture, and it is not a change for the better.

The May edition of *Mad* has a spread titled, "The Devil's Advocate: The Monthly Newsletter For Satan Worshipers." Introducing this section we read the following inscriptions: "Yak Blood vs. Chicken Urine"; "Our Travel Experts Pick the 50

Best Churches, Temples and Mosques in Europe to Deface!";  
"Vomiting on the Cross on Cue: Our Experts Show You How!";  
"Surefire Ways to Foil an Exorcist!"

Then there is the spot called, "The Inquiring Photographer." Four people, complete with their photo, are asked to respond to the question, "What was your most embarrassing moment as a devil worshipper?" Dolores Drippinger from Phoenix, Arizona expressed herself this way: "I walked past St. Patrick's Cathedral the other day without hocking up a wad of green phlegm and spitting on its doorstep."

We will survive *Mad* magazine, but we may not survive the culture that spawned it. When humor becomes debased, and vitriol acquires respectability, we are giving a green light to incivility. The social consequences of this are many and none is more evident than a coarsening of our culture. Here's another example of what I mean.

When I read in the *New York Times* about a play that was surely anti-Catholic, I knew I had to see it (it comes with the territory of being president of the Catholic League). How did I know it was in bad taste? Because when the *Times* calls a play about Catholics "camp" humor, I know what that means.

I was ready for the Catholic bashing element of the play, but not for the crowd reaction. Oh sure, I didn't expect that those who like this stuff would be aghast at what they saw, but I didn't expect them to laugh at every single line and movement that—no matter how inane—took a cheap shot at Catholic beliefs and practices. The play was so dumb I left at intermission. I guess those who stayed behind just hadn't gotten enough.

Reporters often ask how I know when a play, or a movie, is simply joking about Catholicism, or is attacking it. I don't have a gadget that I pull out of my pocket, but I do have a sense of humor and a discriminating taste. Ideally, humor

should be regarded as humor by both the humorist and the target audience. What matters is not how those who attend an event feel about it, rather it is how the target audience would have felt had they had seen it. And that is why *The Tragic and Horrible Life of the Singing Nun* qualifies as bad taste, even though those who saw it got a kick out of it.

When bad taste is seen as humor, it suggests something sinister is happening to the culture. Those who acquiesce are doing a disservice to themselves and to the next generation, and that is why it is necessary to challenge bad taste and root it out. That's not only a good idea, it's necessary for the preservation of good taste. And good taste allows for real humor, not its obverse.