

IT'S ALL ABOUT DISCERNMENT

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I'm often asked how the Catholic League decides what it should do and how it should proceed. Suffice it to say that there are no barometers, metal detectors or replay cameras in this business—it's always a judgment call that cannot be reversed.

Once we verify the facts of a case before us, we must frame the issue. Put differently, it is not good enough to identify wrongdoing—we must decide how we are going to cast the issue and what remedy we are going to pursue. And above all, we have to decide each issue on the basis of its own merits; this presupposes the ability to make critical distinctions. In other words, discernment is everything.

That's the gist of it, now let's see how it plays out in real life. We recently fielded a case about two kindergartners in a Catholic school in California whose parents are gay. This did not sit well with all the parents who had their children in the school, and some of them wanted the adopted children to be expelled. Also, there were reports that one of the gay parents was a teacher's assistant who was trying to influence the students to his way of thinking.

When a reporter from the *Los Angeles Times* asked me whether the kids should be thrown out, I said no. I said there were both principled and prudential reasons to keep them in the school. "There is a moral principle," I said in a news release, "expressed in Judeo-Christian thought, that the innocent should not be punished for the transgressions of the guilty."

Prudentially, I asked: "What should be done about kids who were born out-of-wedlock? What about those kids who have a father or a mother who is the town philanderer? Should we expel kids whose parents are cohabiting? Or are known

adulterers?"

Regarding the gay parent who was a teacher's assistant, I had no problem saying that if the accusations against him were true—that he was abusing his role to proselytize the children—then he should be shown the gate. The classroom exists for the promotion of literacy, not politics.

Another recent case that illustrates how we approach controversial issues occurred just prior to the Super Bowl. Ford/Lincoln planned to run an ad for its new Lincoln truck, the Mark LT. The ad showed a clergyman (he could have passed as either a Catholic or an Episcopalian priest) who finds the keys to the truck in the collection plate; a little girl and her father show up to claim the keys. The ad ended by showing the cleric approaching a church marquee; he then puts the letters L and T on the opposite side of the word US, thus spelling LUST.

The reason the ad was never shown was because of a protest organized by SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests), Catholic activists, lawyers, psychologists and feminists. Ford didn't want to deal with all the negative publicity, so they pulled it.

Before Ford withdrew the ad, I was asked by a reporter from the *Chicago Tribune* what I thought of it (I was able to view it on the Internet). I offered a one-word response—asinine. After the ad was yanked, I was asked what I thought of SNAP's objections. What I said did not endear me to the protesters.

"Unfortunately," I said, "the protesters are so consumed by the sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church that they can no longer see straight." What bothered me most of all was SNAP's flawed judgment: "To assign predator status to a priest in an ad like this," I charged, "suggests that the complainants think of priests as child molesters."

Four of us at the Catholic League (two men and two women)

watched the ad on the Internet, and we all had the same reaction: it made so little sense we thought we missed something, so we watched it again. Significantly, no matter how many times we watched it, we couldn't for the life of us see how the ad was trying to trivialize the sex abuse scandal in the Church. To come to that conclusion, we reasoned, suggested a mindset so obsessed with the scandal that it impaired cognition.

As I said at the beginning, it all comes down to discernment. Unfortunately, what often inhibits discernment is ideology, the tendency to interpret all events through the same lens. To be sure, we all have our philosophical predilections, and that's fine. What is not fine is the willingness to substitute ideology for thought.

In any event, the ability to make critical distinctions is a necessary condition for success in a business like the Catholic League. But it is not sufficient: the other element is courage—the courage to make decisions that run against the grain. Put the two together and the result is a winning combination.