

# League Protests Catholic Portrayal in Two Smithsonian Exhibits

June 23, 1994

Richard Ahlborn  
Curator, Division of Community Life  
National Museum of American History  
14th and Constitution, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20560

Dear Mr. Ahlborn:

I am writing to express the concerns of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights regarding the exhibit "The American Encounters." If the purpose of the exhibit is to educate, it does a very poor job. To be specific, the portrayal of Catholic missionaries as one-dimensional beings out to oppress Native Americans is pure propaganda.

No one who has seriously studied the subject would accept such an unqualified account. Certainly there were abuses by some missionaries of some Indians. But it is also true that some Indians were hardly kind and gentle in their treatment of Europeans. Moreover, much of what the missionaries did was truly beneficial to those whom 'they touched, including the Pueblos. Not to present any of this smacks of the worst kind of political correctness.

If a one-sided portrait of Jews were proposed for an exhibit at the Smithsonian, it is doubtful that it would ever be approved. That is partly because Jews are more responsive to assaults on their heritage than are Catholics. But it is also true that Smithsonian curators would deem it morally outrageous to bash Jews. Why they find Catholic-bashing acceptable is a question I would very much like answered.

Sincerely,

William A. Donohue, Ph.D.

President

cc: Vice President Albert Gore, Chancellor, Smithsonian

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June 23, 1994

Patricia Gossel

National Museum of American History

MRC636

Smithsonian Institution

Washington, D.C. 20560

Dear Ms. Gossel:

I am writing to express the concerns of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights regarding the exhibit "Science and American Life." A crude caricature of the Catholic position on birth control has inexplicably found its way into this exhibit. It seems gratuitous, to say the least, to insert commentary on Catholic teaching on birth control into an exhibition that purports to be about science. And it is offensive to see the rich teaching of *Humanae Vitae* reduced to such a pedestrian level.

I would not expect to see commentary on the dietary practices of Orthodox Jews inserted in an exhibition on "Food and American Life." If I did, and if the statement was not meant to flatter Jews, I would wonder what motivated such a presentation.

The selective presentation of the Catholic Church's teachings on birth control is also mystifying. Why didn't the exhibition take note of the notorious racist ideas of Margaret Sanger, the early feminist promoter of birth control? Surely it would fit the criteria for inclusion in a program on "Science and American Life," at least as defined by the Smithsonian.

There was a time when the Smithsonian was known for excellence. It is a tragedy that political correctness has overcome that standard.

Sincerely,

William A. Donohue, Ph.D.

President

cc: Vice President Albert Gore, Chancellor, Smithsonian