

# **League scores media for trumpeting unsubstantiated allegations against clergy**

The Catholic League views with alarm the extent to which allegations against Catholic priests for sex abuse have been uncritically received by the media and have then been used by anti-Catholic forces to discredit the entire Catholic Church. The recent charge brought against Chicago archbishop Cardinal Joseph Bernardin is a case in point.

In a statement released to the media on November 16, Catholic League president Dr. William A. Donohue said:

“U.S. law holds that everyone is presumed innocent until proven guilty. But the reality is that when the media give voice to mere allegations of criminality, the effect is to seriously taint the character of the accused. We have come a long way since the days when reporters knew of the sexual improprieties of President John F. Kennedy and chose to remain silent.

“So as not to be misunderstood, I am not suggesting that the media cover up wrong-doing in high places, only that they exercise greater scrutiny in deciding when to trumpet someone’s unsubstantiated allegations against public persons. As journalists well know, libel law affords little protection to public persons. It therefore becomes all the more critical that the media do not unwittingly give succor to those whose agenda is extrinsic to their stated objectives.

“The charge recently made by Steven Cook against Cardinal Bernardin is a textbook case of how easy it is to smear someone’s reputation. By all accounts, Cardinal Bernardin employs impeccable characterological credentials. And by contrast, the character of his accuser is seriously flawed.

Cook, an unemployed mental health worker, has admitted to a life of indulgence in sex, alcohol and drugs.

"In addition, Cook says that just last month he experienced 'a seeing and feeling memory' that allowed him to recall that he had been sexually abused by Cardinal Bernardin some 17 years ago. Now one would think that when journalists are given stories right out of the Twilight Zone that doubt might conquer their temptation for a scoop.

"More disturbing than even this is the attention the media have given to anti-Catholic forces who delight in trumpeting uncorroborated charges against Catholic clergymen. Catholics for Free Choice is a splendid example of this. Frances Kissling, president of CFFC, recently admitted that CFFC has no members, i.e., it is nothing more than a well-funded letterhead. Those that have contributed to CFFC's coffers include the contraceptive industry (e.g. Sunnen Foundation), Ford Foundation, Playboy Foundation, the Unitarian Church and Planned Parenthood, none of which has a record of support for Catholic causes.

"Furthermore CFFC is not a bonafide Catholic organization. On November 4th, the U.S. Bishops' Administrative Committee formally declared that CFFC 'has no affiliation, formal or otherwise, with the Catholic Church.'

"Perhaps the greatest proof that the empty charge against Cardinal Bernardin is being used by anti-Catholic forces is the public statements that CFFC has issued against the Cardinal and the Church. CFFC is an abortion rights organization. The charge against Cardinal Bernardin has nothing to do with abortion, yet CFFC spokespersons have hit the media taking up the cause of Steven Cook. What this proves is that CFFC will seize any opportunity it can to discredit the Catholic Church, whether or not it has anything to do with its stated mission. In short, CFFC is not only not a Catholic organization, it is an explicitly anti-Catholic

force with a not-so-hidden agenda.”

Reaction to the charge against Bernardin was not limited to our shores. Vatican Radio, the official voice of the Holy See, called the charge “filthy, worthy only of disdain.”

Raymond L. Flynn, United States ambassador to the Holy See told the media that anti-Catholic attitudes can play a part in the way such stories are presented to the public. “Catholic bashing has become so commonplace,” Flynn said, “that charges such as these need to be looked at very cautiously before drawing any conclusions.”

Flynn went on to add, “People shouldn’t be too quick to make a judgement of guilt before all the facts are known.”