

# MEDIA FLAG “EX-ALTAR BOY” STATUS OF DEFENDANT

In May, two 15-year-olds, a boy and a girl, were arrested for the Central Park murder of a Manhattan man. Nothing unusual about that, but there was something unusual about the way the New York media played the story: newspapers, TV and radio news shows all cited the “ex-altar boy” status of defendant Chris Vasquez.

On May 26, the New York *Daily News* presented the story in a headline that read, “Shock over altar boy turned suspect.” The headline in the May 29 edition of the *New York Post* read, “Ex-altar boy declared ‘fit for trial’ after suicide watch.” The *New York Times* did not flag the boy’s former status in a headline, but it did mention it in a news story on May 26 that Vasquez was “a former altar boy at St. Francis De Sales Roman Catholic Church.” Even the Associated Press ran a story nationwide on May 27 citing the “former altar boy” status of the accused.

There are several aspects of this story-within-a-story that are fascinating. To begin with, the boy did not attend a Catholic school: he was enrolled in the fashionable Beekman School. So why didn’t the headlines read, “Preppy School Boy Arrested for Murder”? Also, why was it reported that the girl, who also attended an elite non-sectarian school (Columbia Grammar and Preparatory School), formerly attended Loyola School, described by the Times as “run by the Jesuits”?

Since when was the prior status of the accused more newsworthy than the defendant’s current status? The league raised these questions with the New York newspapers. It was glad to see that *Newsday*, the Long Island daily, was alone in not citing these irrelevant facts (it should be noted that a few years ago the league protested to *Newsday* its coverage of an “ex-

altar boy" on trial story; apparently, the message sunk in this time).

As the league asked the editors of the offending newspapers, "Had the offender been bar-mitzvahed would you have mentioned that as well?" We also asked, "If an ex-altar boy cop saves someone's life do you mention his previous status?" Everyone, including those who reported this story in the electronic and print media, knows the answer. Pity that ethics means so little to so many.