

MORE THAN JUST A PET PEEVE

by William A. Donohue

It is more than just a pet peeve of mine to encounter gratuitous slams against Catholicism. To be sure, what I'm going to describe is hardly the worst of what crosses my desk, but it is the kind of stuff that gets my goat.

The recent movie, *The Saint*, has virtually nothing to do with Roman Catholicism. So why is it that the movie opens with introducing the audience to what columnist Don Feder has said is "the most vicious portrayal of a Catholic priest" that he has ever seen?

Why is it that in an Indiana newspaper the reporter found it necessary to identify a man caught in a sting as "a former priest"? With regard to the others who were arrested we learned only their name, residence and age. Why is it that in a Gannett news story on MTV host Jenny McCarthy she is cited as "the product of Catholic schools"? Was it because she was also identified as a former Playmate of the Year?

Why is it that in a Nebraska newspaper story on the nightclub antics of young people that the only persons who were identified by religion were Catholics?

Why is it that a California newspaper found it necessary to disclose that a person involved in a car crash had "a sticker of the Virgin Mary on the steering wheel"?

Why is it that in a New York newspaper we read that a pro-life legislator is a Roman Catholic when no one's religion from the pro-abortion side is mentioned?

Why is it that in an Arizona newspaper the Roman Catholic status of a lawmaker is cited in an unflattering story about him?

Why is it that a major weekly magazine ran a piece on Catholic delinquents only to mention that the youths were "products of Catholic schools"?

I could go on and on but you get the point. It seems that there are those in the media who can't wait to seize on the religious affiliation of Roman Catholics when they are up to no good. Two comments about this.

No other religion receives quite the same treatment and none of the good deeds that Catholics do (cops come quickly to mind) merit citation of their religious status. There is a reason for this and it is called prejudice.

The source of this prejudice has much to do with what social scientists call "leveling." Those who harbor a prejudice against Catholicism want the rest of the world to know that there is much that Catholics do that is despicable. The funny thing is that this is hardly news to Catholics, but it is also true that this is hardly the real point that is being conveyed.

What is being conveyed is the idea that the teachings of the Catholic Church are nothing but platitudes, having no real effect on behavior. But as every Catholic knows, sin is not a negative reflection on Catholicism—it is a negative reflection on the sinner. What the bigots want the public to believe, however, is that Catholicism is merely a system of ethics, and is therefore undeserving of the respect that it has traditionally been accorded by non-Catholics.

At bottom, then, these gratuitous references to the religious affiliation of certain Catholics has to do with toppling the status that the Church has achieved in society more than anything else. Such attempts at leveling are done to satisfy the convictions of writers and producers that the Catholic Church should have no moral standing that is above that of any other religion or secular school of thought.

That is why these gratuitous remarks need to be challenged. Looked at in isolation, none of them demand much attention. But a culture is the product of the cumulative thoughts and

deeds of its people, and that is why we cannot take what is happening too lightly.

To do nothing is to allow circulation of the idea that Catholicism has nothing special to offer to society. Once this notion is accepted, it clears the way for those whose ideas are positively destructive to the social order.

We have lived through enough to know that those who seek to promote a culture that is antithetical to Catholic teachings leave nothing but heartache in their wake. That is reason enough to see these gratuitous comments as more than just a pet peeve.