

NEW YORK TIMES AGAINST “ZERO TOLERANCE”?

The November 11 *New York Times* ran an editorial on “zero tolerance” policies and the trouble they can cause.

Looking back at the “zero tolerance” policy for school misconduct that the Congress adopted in 1994, the *New York Times* opined that it was a “reasonable step” at the time. But it now says that this policy “has been disastrous for young people,” and cited many problems attendant to its implementation. The editorial made sense.

Regrettably, the *New York Times* did not pronounce against the problems inherent in all “zero tolerance” policies. For example, on April 25, 2002, an editorial in the *New York Times* criticized the bishops for not making good on their “zero tolerance” proposal for dealing with cases of priestly sexual abuse. Referring to newly announced strictures, the *Times* said, “Unfortunately, these recommendations stopped short of a zero-tolerance policy for all abusive priests, an issue on which there appears to have been strenuous disagreement.”

In the same piece the *Times* said, “We hope that Cardinal Theodore McCarrick was correct in saying that the pope’s own remarks, especially his comment that there is ‘no place’ in the priesthood for child abusers, suggests that a zero-tolerance policy may eventually take shape. It should.”

The problem with all “zero tolerance” policies is twofold: their absolutist language and their universal application. By definition, they never allow for nuance, for mitigating circumstances, or shades of gray. Just as there is a difference between a student who knifes a classmate and one who bullies an overweight kid, there is a difference between a

rapist and a fondler. But in the eyes of “zero tolerance,” all four offenders should at least be banished.

The *New York Times* should now write an editorial criticizing the adoption of all institutional “zero tolerance” policies. It should not matter whether the institution is educational, religious, financial, journalistic, etc. What should matter is the nature of the policy itself.