

PAPAL VISIT: WINNERS—MEDIA; LOSERS—DISSENTERS

Media treatment of the pope's visit to St. Louis was overwhelmingly fair. Indeed, so few problems were spotted by the Catholic League, or brought to our attention, that it can safely be said that never before has Pope John Paul II been treated so fairly by journalists and broadcasters alike. There were, however, some interesting things that happened while the pope was in the U.S.

There was a website on the internet, www.papalvisit1999.com, that fraudulently misrepresented the visit. When tapped into, the section titled "Unholy Sex" featured pornography. The site, operated by the Seattle-based Internet Entertainment Group (IEG), triggered a lawsuit by the Archdiocese of St. Louis.

When the Catholic League learned of this, it immediately pledged its support to the archdiocese. As it turned out, it was not needed: Judge Stephen Limbaugh issued a preliminary injunction requiring IEG to remove the sexually-explicit material. He recognized that the site infringed on the trademark of the Archdiocese of St. Louis and had thus nothing to do with free speech.

As with any papal visit, the predictable band of anti-Catholic extremist groups showed up to protest. Among them were American Atheists and Modern Manna Ministries; Catholics for a Free Choice chimed in from afar.

American Atheists charged that the pope was a "very real threat" to separation between church and state. "They [Catholics]," said the press release, "want non-adherents to support their schools, they advocate and promote prejudice and bigotry toward Atheists, gays, and other minorities, and they

are buying up American hospitals in order to limit or eradicate women's health services."

Though American Atheists generated virtually no news coverage, the Catholic League responded with its own statement to the media. "Having been fleeced of \$629,500 by their founder and former hero, Madalyn Murray O'Hair, the struggling American Atheists are now lecturing Catholics once again," we said. We admitted that "Catholic hospitals are buying up community hospitals," maintaining that "this is something that all champions of human rights should applaud, if not fund." As for the crack about Catholics being bigoted against atheists, we said that "Catholics don't hate atheists, they just ignore them. Would that atheists do likewise, but, of course, they can't: to ignore Catholics would gut their identity, an identity that was forged by their Commander-in-Thief, Madalyn Murray O'Hair."

Modern Manna Ministries showed up with 40 volunteers and 100,000 copies of an anti-Catholic booklet published by its founder, Danny Vierra. Vierra, an ex-Catholic, was disappointed that Catholics refused to accept his tracts, stating that he had a "mandate from God" to warn Catholics about their fate. No one paid any attention.

Francis Kissling of Catholics for a Free Choice made the usual remarks about the Church's repressive policies on women and abortion rights. The good news is that she received less publicity this time than she was able to garner during any previous papal visit, signaling that the media may finally have caught on to her game.

Unhappy Catholics got some media coverage, but very little. A small group of dissenters held a vigil outside the Cathedral Basilica where the pope appeared, but it did not make the evening news on any of the networks.

John Allen of the *National Catholic Reporter* criticized the

pope for not continuing “the conversation” on women priests; Father Charles Curran, who teaches at a Methodist school, opined on the need for more dialogue; Robert Schutzius of the Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church complained about the lack of Catholic unions in schools and hospitals; Robert Blattner voiced the concerns of his group, the National Association for a Married Priesthood (Bob, a former priest, is member of this outfit, which is also known as Corpus); Catholic Women for Justice demanded more females in leadership positions in the Church; and Mary Ryan, who advertised herself as someone who doesn’t go to Mass, but is nonetheless a member in good standing in Call to Action, waxed inelegant on the need for women priests.

But not all dissenters felt the need to protest. Rosemary Radford Reuther, a feminist theologian, spoke for many malcontents when she said of the pope, “He’s on his last legs.”

Despite these pockets of protest, which mostly went unnoticed, the crowds that turned out for the pope were large and enthusiastic. It was the masses who love Pope John Paul II that the media rightfully focused on, giving due tribute to his pontificate. What they captured was a pope whose commitment to truth, liberty and justice never wavers. And it is on those legs that his legacy stands, for now and forever.