

# THE POLITICS OF THE ST. PATRICK'S DAY PARADE

**Bill Donohue**

When I became president of the Catholic League in 1993, there was no Catholic League unit in New York's St. Patrick's Day Parade. That soon changed. For the past 20 years we have had a small contingent in the parade, but we will not be marching in 2015.

As I have already indicated, my support for the parade's rules, about which I have invested a lot of time and energy defending on radio and TV for the past two decades, was based on the principal that no groups with their own agenda could march. I have constantly defended the exclusion of pro-life Catholic groups on this basis, using it analogously to defend the right of parade officials to exclude gay groups. So when I was asked how I would react to a gay group being asked to join, I said I could support this decision only if a pro-life group were also invited. Indeed, I explicitly pressed for confirmation that there has been a formal change in the parade's rules. I was told that there was and that a pro-life group would march in 2015. Count me in, I said.

It soon became apparent that things were different. I was asked to keep the news of the parade rule change confidential prior to being announced on September 3. I did. I was also told that the parade's new spokesman, William O'Reilly, would call me on September 2 to inform me of how he was going to roll out the story. He never called. Moreover, someone leaked the story to Irish Central and the Associated Press late on September 2. When I got to work on the 3rd, the story was out and I was being called by the media for my reaction.

The media were sent a statement by O'Reilly on the morning of the 3rd formally making the announcement. I was not sent a copy. The statement was worrisome because it made no mention of a change in the parade's rules, or that a pro-life unit would be welcome. Instead, it concentrated exclusively on the gay group.

I did not allow my displeasure with the absence of a principled rule change in O'Reilly's statement to alter my commitment to marching. But I intentionally titled my news release, "NYC St. Patrick's Day Parade Amends Rules," saying, "I have been assured that the rules have been formally changed to allow both of these groups

[a gay and a pro-life unit], as well as others, to march under their own banner. That being the case, there should be no controversy."

O'Reilly said on the morning of the 3rd that no gay group, other than Out@NBCUniversal would be marching in 2015. Later that day he was overridden by John L. Lahey, the vice chairman of the parade committee: he told the media at the New York Athletic Club that other gay groups could still apply to march in next year's parade. Lahey is the president of Quinnipiac University and an advocate of gay groups marching in the parade; he is next in line to become chairman of the parade committee.

Curiously, no mention of a pro-life group was cited in either O'Reilly's statement or Lahey's remarks. But on the evening of the 3rd, the *Wall Street Journal* wrote that "As part of the change in policy, the organizers also will now let a 'pro-life' group march with a banner, said parade spokesman William O'Reilly."

When I learned that a pro-life group would be marching, I felt relieved. But it didn't empty my concerns. According to Lahey, there would be more gay groups marching in 2015. Which gay groups? DignityUSA says it is a Catholic gay group, but it

openly rejects the Church's teachings on sexuality and is properly regarded as a dissident, if not anti-Catholic, group. I also noticed that there was no talk about having more pro-life groups marching.

On September 8, Lahey was again asked if more gay groups would be marching next year. He hedged. "I won't say that it is possible that we would consider another group," he said. "We are under pressure to shorten the parade—I would be surprised if we would." As usual, he never said a word about pro-life Catholics marching.

On September 9, O'Reilly was asked by *Wall Street Journal* reporter Mark Morales to reply to the promise that parade officials had made to me, namely that a pro-life group would march in the parade. "Mr. O'Reilly said that if a group opposed to abortion rights applied, parade organizers would look at the application favorably, but that none did so." O'Reilly also said that the list of groups marching in the 2015 parade was "settled."

This is truly amazing. The fact is there was no reason for either gay groups or pro-life groups to apply given the reality that there was no public announcement of a rule change. This accounts for the fact that no pro-life group applied. So what about the NBC gay group? How did they know there was a rule change when no other group did?

OUT@NBCUniversal didn't have to apply—it was selected. NBC televises the parade and it threatened not to broadcast the event if a gay group was not included. Francis X. Comerford is the chief revenue officer at NBC and a member of the parade committee; he is also a past grand marshal of the parade, as is Lahey. The dots are not hard to connect. There is a lot of money at stake, both for NBC and the parade. There is also a lot of prestige to be had in elite Catholic circles to show their colleagues how "progressive" they are.

The final straw for me was when Lahey was asked by Irish Central to comment on my assertion that a pro-life group was slated to march. On September 10, he said, "That won't be happening." In other words, I was double-crossed.

The goal of some in the Irish community is to neuter the Catholic element in the St. Patrick's Day Parade. They want it to be an ethnic celebration. But as I have said, we are not the Irish League: we are the Catholic League. Indeed, our full name is the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights.

Under the direction of Lahey, who has effectively taken over control of the parade, there is no room for a pro-life Catholic group in 2015, but there is room for a non-Irish, non-Catholic, gay group. But the worst is yet to come.

When Lahey was told that radical gay groups, led by Brendan Fay, would like to march in 2016, he "reacted enthusiastically." Fay is a former official of DignityUSA, an outfit that works against the teachings of the Catholic Church. "I think Brendan Fay will find we're very receptive," Lahey said.

For the record, DignityUSA is a group which had Paul Shanley as its chaplain, the most infamous child rapist priest in the history of the Catholic Church. More recently, it opposed the request made by the Catholic League that the Empire State Building light its towers in honor of Mother Teresa's centenary. In 2010, it expressed its displeasure with the election of New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan as the new president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

This explains why the Catholic League is finished with the New York St. Patrick's Day Parade.