

# Pope Defamed at New Jersey State College

Anti-Catholic bigotry on college campuses is nothing new, but what happened at a Wayne, New Jersey state college this past summer suggests that matters are getting much worse.

On July 5, 1994, Professor Vernon McClean, an instructor in the African-American and Caribbean studies department at William Paterson College, opened the first session of his summer class, "Racism and Sexism in a Changing America," by having each student identify his religion in writing. He then began his lecture by saying that Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam had once called the Pope a "racist c \_ - s\_ \_ ." Professor McClean then said Farrakhan was right.

One student, a Catholic, discussed the class with his mother that night, prompting her to write a letter to college president, Arnold Speert. Soon after, copies of this private correspondence were distributed to the entire class. The gravity of this action was compounded by the fact that the family's address and phone number were unlisted. The only response by the college to the mother's complaint was to arrange a meeting between the student and the Dean of Students.

It became readily apparent that the college intended to quickly dismiss the matter. Generally, a student meets with the Dean of Students only when there is cause for disciplinary action against a student. This case involved faculty misbehavior and thus belonged under the purview of the Academic Dean.

In the meantime, the student's mother contacted the League for assistance. After gathering all the facts from the mother and the student, we contacted the college. No one in any office

would speak with us. They took great umbrage at our inquiry and were totally uncooperative. We received the same treatment from three different offices – we were either dismissed or treated as though we had no right to be questioning the incident.

Following this lack of cooperation and response from the college, we issued a press release demanding an apology from the college and disciplinary action against Professor McClean.

The New Jersey papers gave the issue thorough coverage and the New York radio and television media also took note. But the outcry was tame compared to that which greeted Nation of Islam spokesman Khalid Muhammad last fall. Muhammad, a minion of Farrakhan's, had uttered bigoted remarks against Jews and Catholics at Kean College last November.

In an official statement, the League declared that "If the same characterization had been made about Martin Luther King, or some other widely revered person, college officials would have been quick to respond. But their silence in the wake of this anti-Catholic statement suggests that Catholic bashing is tolerated at William Paterson College. That this comment was made in a required multicultural course is all the more telling: respect for diversity and tolerance for all religions apparently do not extend to Catholics."

After the college's "investigation" was completed, it made a public statement saying that the student misconstrued the remarks and that, in any event, Professor McClean now "disassociates" himself from the comments he attributed to Farrakhan. President Speert said that the investigation was "confidential" and that "the College is satisfied that the matter has been resolved fully and completely."

The League, however, was not satisfied. It quickly labeled President Speert's attempt to resolve the issue as "a monumental failure." There was no apology, no statement

addressing the issue of requiring students at a state college to identify their religion, no comment on distributing private correspondence to the public and no action taken against Professor McClean.

Perhaps most damaging to the college, however, was the information that the League uncovered after the story broke. Several faculty, alumni and students called to report other instances of rank bigotry. It seems that William Paterson has a history of intolerance for certain segments of society, namely for Catholics and Jews. We received word that a female professor had lost her job because she was "an observant Jew," and that many other professors on the campus were even more bigoted than Vernon McClean.

Accordingly, the Catholic League called upon state officials to conduct a formal hearing on the campus of William Paterson College; Governor Christie Whitman, senior higher education officials and area legislators were contacted. Given Governor Whitman's quick and sharp response to a New Jersey beach vendor who was hawking anti-gay T-shirts (this happened at the same time as the college incident), the Catholic League expected the Governor to be even tougher in the William Paterson case. But thus far she has been mute. And this is the second incident in nine months at a New Jersey state college where bigotry occurred and nothing was done about it.

The Catholic League will not be satisfied until justice has been done. Our goal is not to simply chastise one college professor, but to root out the bigotry that is systematically lodged in college curricula and administrative behavior. We're taking the long view on this one and it would behoove people like President Speert to do likewise.