

REP. McDERMOTT GUILTY OF CATHOLIC BAITING

On July 31, during the course of a debate over competing bills on human cloning, Rep. Jim McDermott of Washington state made several statements from the House floor about Catholicism that were offensive. On August 1, we immediately blasted him for his comments. When pressed for an apology, we were told that there would be none. Which is why we went after him again on August 3. Here's what happened.

Speaking from the House floor, McDermott likened the current debate on cloning to an ancient story about the pope and the Spanish king. He began his remarks with the following tale:

"We are like the 16th century Spanish king who went to the Pope and asked him if it was all right for human beings to drink coffee. The coffee bean had been brought from the New World. It had a drug in it that made people get kind of excited and it was a great political controversy about whether or not it was right to drink coffee. And so the Spanish king went to the Pope and said, Pope, is it all right."

Then, in an obvious reference to Pope John Paul II's recent denunciation of embryonic stem cell research, McDermott commented, "Well, we had that just the other day, and the Pope said, this is not right." McDermott then brought up Galileo and pointedly said of his colleagues that "here we are making a decision like we were the house of cardinals on a religious issue..."

We unloaded with the following comment to the press: "Congressman McDermott is out of line. He is acting like a bully instead of a statesman. The pope, representing the Catholic Church, has every right to voice his position on any issue he wants. Rep. McDermott is free to disagree, but he is not morally free to disabuse his office by engaging in

Catholic baiting.”

Then William Donohue challenged McDermott to a debate: “If Rep. McDermott wants to debate the scientific merits of stem cell research or cloning, I will be happy to do so. But he’ll first have to learn how to check his thinly-veiled contempt for the role of Catholics in deciding public policy issues.”

Not only was McDermott not interested in a debate, he stuck to his position and refused to apologize. Consequently, we embarked on a public relations campaign on his behalf. We exposed his darker side to all of his colleagues in the House, as well as to every state legislator in Washington.

In his letter to McDermott’s colleagues in D.C. and in his home state of Washington, Donohue charged the congressman with “appealing to the worst instincts in anti-Catholics.” “From the beginning of American history,” Donohue said, “the charge has been made by anti-Catholics that public policy decisions should not be tailored to the beliefs of the Catholic Church.” Donohue hastened to add, “While even Catholic clerics would agree with this as a general statement, it would be dishonest to claim that the historical implications of such commentary are unknown.”

The Catholic League president then bore in on the heart of the issue: “To be specific, remarks like this are code for Catholic baiting: the Church is seeking to impose its theology on American society. That is the message and the latest messenger is Rep. Jim McDermott.” Donohue ended his letter asking the lawmakers to personally address McDermott on this issue.

On August 7, the league’s director of communications, Patrick Scully, was set to debate Congressman McDermott on KVI radio in Seattle. But the congressman refused the debate format. So McDermott went first and Scully followed. However, McDermott was afforded an hour and Scully was given 10 minutes.

McDermott stuck to his position, offering no apology. Indeed, he said many times that the Catholic Church has a history of "going up against science," and even questioned the propriety of President Bush meeting with the pope to discuss stem cell research. McDermott also attacked the Catholic League as "that far right group looking for a cause." What makes his charge so fascinating is that McDermott's voting record is almost in complete accord with the positions of the ACLU. Moreover, he voted against a ban on partial-birth abortion and against the school prayer amendment.

When McDermott attacked the Catholic League, one of our members in the Seattle area got on the air and lambasted the congressman. She challenged him to give out his e-mail address so people could let him have it. McDermott laughed saying, "She purports to lecture me, an Irishman, on Catholicism," thus showing how deceitful he is: McDermott is Episcopalian.

To round out his perspective on the life issue, McDermott said a baby has no rights until it is born and that anyone who disagrees with this position is an "extremist."

William Donohue was able to blast McDermott twice on national TV: he nailed him on "Crossfire" and "Hardball with Chris Matthews." Donohue emphasized that regardless of which side someone chooses on this issue (or on any other issue), there is no room for bigotry.

We think the congressman should hear from you. Write to him at Rep. Jim McDermott, 1035 Longworth HOB, Washington, D.C. 20515.