

SELECTIVE SENSIBILITIES

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Almost 8 in 10 Americans are Christian and approximately 96 percent celebrate Christmas. That makes for few Scrooges, though one would never know it given the corrosive effect that militant atheist groups, and their multicultural allies in the public and private sectors, have had on our culture. There is something terribly wrong when we have to be on our guard about offending someone for simply wishing him a Merry Christmas.

We have become so politically correct, so insistent that everyone walk a linguistic tightrope, that it makes for boring conversations; people are afraid to speak their mind lest they offend someone.

It's so phony. Haven't we all told a joke that stereotypes others? Who is so virginal that he hasn't laughed at a good-humored ethnic joke? Why, then, have we become so outrageously uptight, scared to death that we may say the wrong thing?

To be honest, the observations I just made do not have universal application. For example, it doesn't apply to those who relentlessly, and maliciously, stick it to Catholics. They can bash all night long on late-night TV, and in the comedy clubs, and not have to worry about offending anyone. That's because most Catholics have learned to take their lumps in stride. Some say this is a mark of maturity. I call it cowardice.

Here at the Catholic League we have to confront bigotry, without also becoming hypersensitive. That's why we did not object to most of the Walmart Halloween costumes: dressing up as a priest or a nun is not proof of anti-Catholicism; it can be done in a good-natured way. But when we learned that Walmart could not stomach "Fat Lady" costumes, we wondered whether it sold offensive Catholic garb. It did (depicting

Our Blessed Mother with bloody eyes is not funny) and that is why we objected, limiting our concerns to the few that crossed the line.

If we can take a joke—accepting Halloween costumes that poke fun at priests and nuns—why can't politically correct secularists return the favor? Why are their sensibilities so selectively employed? We don't lack for examples, as this edition of *Catalyst* proves (please see the stories on pp. 4 and 6 to make sense of the following examples).

During the Vietnam War, I spent four years in the U.S. Air Force at Beale A.F.B. in Marysville-Yuba City, California. Religion was not a big subject of discussion, but not because it was taboo: everyone was free to express his convictions, one way or the other; it's just that young guys tend to talk more about girls than God. Today, much has changed.

When an officer is dressed down for merely mentioning Jesus' name, something is terribly wrong. It's not normal. The Latino soldier was praising his mother's reliance on Jesus, citing it as a positive resource for him growing up. Astonishingly, he was told that his essay, published in the base newspaper, was offensive and in violation of military policy.

When a woman in her 60s is fired for saying "God bless you"—she had the audacity to say this to voters after they had cast their ballot—we have another case of madness. Believe it or not, she actually invoked this phrase after someone sneezed. It's true. Why she wasn't guillotined is not certain.

What is even worse about these examples of religious bigotry, and political correctness run amok, is the venue: in both instances it was government agents who levied the punishment. So what freedoms is the officer fighting for? Freedom of speech doesn't count for him. Neither does freedom of religion. Ditto for the woman who performed her civic duty by being a ballot monitor.

Our culture has changed, but not for the better. To be sure, we can be justly proud of the tremendous progress made by minorities and women. But when it comes to the content of our norms and values, we have taken a giant leap backwards. When the sacred and profane are reversed—when what was sacred is now profane, and when what was profane is now sacred—we are regressing. Not to admit to this problem is to assure its survival; unfortunately, that is what many do.

Cultures change, but only because some get involved, and that is where you come in: being a spectator is what most people settle for, but it is only the gladiators that determine the outcome. Can one person make a difference? Of course—parents do all the time. In terms of changing a culture, it typically takes the combined effort of like-minded persons. But to win, they must be determined.

We must never forget that those who succeeded in silencing the officer and the poll watcher did so because they were determined to do so. It must also be said, however, that their victories are capable of being repealed; it depends, in part, on the determination of those who object. Similarly, those who succeeded in supporting an organization that got a megastore to stop disrespecting Catholics with their offensive Halloween costumes—that would be YOU—were able to prevail because they were dogged in their effort.

On that happy note, I bid you all a very Merry Christmas!