

SHOULD PRACTICING CATHOLICS HOLD PUBLIC OFFICE

One of the things the Catholic League has been closely monitoring during these difficult times is the anti-Catholic fallout that has accompanied the sex abuse scandal. Perhaps nothing has incensed us more than the growing skepticism in the media that Catholic district attorneys should not be trusted to investigate diocesan abuse. This has happened in New York and Ohio and may be happening elsewhere.

Anti-Catholicism raised its ugly head on Long Island when *Newsday* columnist Paul Vitello questioned the propriety of allowing Nassau County District Attorney Denis Dillon to investigate allegations of sexual misconduct against priests.

Dillon is a practicing Catholic. For Vitello, this is sufficient grounds to disqualify Dillon from any further investigation into these matters. Dillon concluded that all allegations against priests in the Diocese of Rockville Centre occurred beyond the state's five-year statute of limitations, making moot further inquiry.

Vitello charged that Dillon is active in his religion and that his spokesman, Rick Hinshaw, writes for the *Long Island Catholic*.

William Donohue blasted Vitello for his bigotry in the following news release:

"In one sense, what Paul Vitello has done is welcome: it removes any doubt as to his motives. In his world, practicing Catholics who hold public office need to be treated as suspect characters. Just Catholics. Nothing is said about Protestants, Jews or Muslims. They can attend church services, go to synagogue, frequent mosques, be actively engaged in their religion and still hold public office. But Catholics are not

to be trusted. They're different from the rest of us.

"Article VI of the U.S. Constitution holds that 'no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.' To the extent that New York State law reflects this understanding, no doubt Vitello would like to insert a caveat exempting coverage for practicing Catholics. As he said in his article, it is Dillon's 'attitude' about his religion that is most objectionable.

"Finally, I would like to add to Vitello's paranoia: Rick Hinshaw previously served as director of communications for the Catholic League. Though Vitello will suffer apoplexy when he learns this, he should also know that Rick served us with distinction."

The Ohio example stems from an editorial in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. In the May 7 editorial, "Toward healing," mention was made of Cuyahoga County prosecutor Bill Mason's investigation of the local diocese. Then, in an incredibly bigoted comment, the editorial said, "Mason is a practicing Catholic, which may trouble some people who fear a cover-up."

To this Donohue replied: "So now all Catholics are considered suspect. It would be instructive to know whether the editorial board is just as skeptical about lawyers who are Jewish, black or gay investigating alleged wrongdoing committed by Jews, African Americans and homosexuals."

What is most amazing about these kinds of comments is that they are said in public. It is one thing for those in the media to express over cocktails their reservations about the ability of lay Catholic D.A.'s to do a fair job, quite another to write columns and editorials about their qualms. Don't they realize how this offends Catholics? Or don't they care?

The media have every right to criticize the way the Catholic Church has handled the sexual abuse scandal. But no one has a

right to impugn the character of innocent persons who are just doing their job. Religious profiling is immoral.