

WHAT TO MAKE OF “THE OMEGA CODE”?

When “The Omega Code” opened this fall, only 300 theaters showed it. But when church groups started buying tickets by the boat load, it soon became apparent that the film was a sleeper.

The movie, which was financed by Trinity Broadcasting Network—the nation’s largest Christian broadcaster—cost only \$7.2 million to make, but grossed more money than virtually any other film it opened against. That it has proven to be a financial success is questioned by no one. But some are questioning whether “The Omega Code” contains anti-Catholic elements.

The church-goers who responded with unheralded support for the movie were Evangelicals. What they saw was a film that told a story about an ancient code, buried in the Bible, which predicts apocalyptic events at the end of the millennium. Indeed, Michael York, who stars in “The Omega Code,” admits the movie “caters to a certain millennial paranoia,” drawing inspiration from prophecies in the Book of Revelation. There is an antichrist who lives in Rome (he is a former Catholic) and his home is marked with church imagery.

Several Catholic League members found “Omega” to be at least tainted with anti-Catholicism. And they were not alone. Dennis King in *Tulsa World* described it as having “not-so-subtle flourishes of Catholic bashing,” and Kathleen Craughwell of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote that “one of the more troubling aspects of ‘The Omega Code’ is the seeming demonization of Roman Catholicism.” Such charges were denied by the producer, Matthew Crouch.

“Omega” did not open in the New York area so the league was

not in a position to offer a formal statement on the film.

TIME SHOWS BIAS—AGAIN

Time has a thing about Catholicism. We don't know exactly why, but it is clear that the magazine treats the Church with great suspicion. And that's putting it kindly.

In a November 15 story on Catholic hospital mergers with non-Catholic institutions, *Time* flagged the story in its index by questioning, "Are church-run institutions imposing their faith on patients?" In case you're wondering which church they meant, the story was entitled, "The Catholic Hospital Boom." Flipping to the story, it is now renamed, "Holy Owned," with the interesting subtitle, "Is it fair for a Catholic hospital to impose its morals on patients?" What's driving *Time* mad, of course, is that Catholic hospitals don't kill babies in their mother's womb.

By raising this question, *Time* intends to lay the seed that there is something inherently illegitimate about the Catholic church insisting on Catholic standards in Catholic institutions. Is it fair that some Jewish institutions observe dietary customs that Catholics do not accept? Only a jerk or an anti-Semite would raise such a question. As for the us, we'd be relieved to know that *Time* employs jerks.

THE PRIEST AND THE MODEL

It is no secret that the media love conflict. Or that the tensions between sex and religion make for good copy. But when the media force a conflict between sex and religion—especially when the religion is Catholicism—they can expect to hear from the Catholic League. That's what happened in the case of media hype over a yet-to-be shown CBS series, "Survivor."

Next summer, CBS plans to run 13 one-hour episodes of a Mark Burnett produced show, "Survivor." The program will feature 16 volunteers and are marooned together for 49 days on a deserted island off Borneo. The catch is that every three days one member of the group will be voted off the island by the rest, with the last person left collecting a prize of \$1 million.

When the league learned that Burnett had said that "Maybe there will be a 60-year old Catholic priest and a 20-year-old drop-dead (gorgeous) model from Los Angeles," William Donohue decided to write the producer. He had only one suggestion: "how about pairing the young woman with a Buddhist monk?" His reasoning was that "They are underrepresented on television and might make for an interesting combination."

Burnett, we are pleased to note, called Donohue promptly explaining what really happened. When asked by reporters the kinds of characters who would wind up on the island, Burnett mentioned a traffic cop, a Catholic priest, a lawyer, homemaker, a model, et al. It was the media, more specifically a reporter for Reuters, that juxtaposed the priest with the model.

Donohue was satisfied with Burnett's candor and contriteness.

HATING CATHOLICS

The hate mail that comes into the Catholic League, on a rather steady basis, offers proof of the hatred against Catholics.

We say this knowing that some will say there is a difference between hating the Catholic League and hating Catholics. Of course there is, but it is also true that much of the hatred towards the league is expressed in a manner that goes way beyond contempt for what we're doing. Indeed, it gets right to the heart of why the league exists—to combat defamation and discrimination against individual Catholics and the institutional Church. Take the following as one example.

Robert Rosario is the Catholic League's auditor. We are fortunate to have him: he is supremely competent and strongly committed to our mission. On November 10, Bob was in Grand Central Station heading to catch his train home when he noticed a flyer. It read, "CATHOLIC BASHING for Fun + Profit." There was a drawing that showed rosary beads being flushed down the toilet, along with the following statement appeared:

"A Victory Celebration for Freedom of Expression hosted by Charles Saatchi [the art collector who owns the 'Sensation' exhibit that the Catholic league protested]—Art patron and co-founder of Saatchi & Saatchi, Proud agency for General Mills, Kraft Foods, Toyota & Tylenol. Guest Speakers: Arnold Lehman—Director, Brooklyn Museum of Art; Chris Ofili—'Virgin Mary'; Ben Affleck—'Dogma.' Venue: Saatchi & Saatchi, 375 Hudson St., Friday, 11/19, 6:30 p.m. Donations Welcome to Defray Legal Expenses."

It looked like a scam, and it was. But that didn't stop us from contacting the companies who were falsely mentioned in the flyer.

This just goes to show that those who object to the Catholic League's protest of the filthy attack on Our Blessed Mother at

the Brooklyn Museum of Art have a much bigger target than the league. They wouldn't have done this unless their goal was to stick it to Catholicism. That's why they threw the rosary beads down the toilet.

TINA AND GRAYDON

The full-page ad in the *New York Times* that the Catholic League did on Cond, Nast's *Vanity Fair* (October 26) led to some interesting interviews and correspondence; the online site of Brills Content featured the league's extended statement on this issue. We also stumbled on some interesting information concerning *Vanity Fair*'s previous editor-in-chief, Tina Brown (who now heads the Miramax-backed publication, *Talk*), and the magazine's current chief, Graydon Carter.

Last year, when Brown was with the *New Yorker*, she was approached by one of her writers, Paul Wilkes, who suggested a profile on a Massachusetts rabbi. When Wilkes described the rabbi as "a seeker of truth," Brown's "eyes glazed over." She then told Wilkes, "How about a profile of Bruce Ritter?" Father Ritter, who recently died, left Covenant House after charges of pedophilia were made.

For his part, Carter, when questioned about the Christopher Hitchens attack on Mother Teresa that appeared in 1995 in *Vanity Fair*, had this to say: "It's strange in this country, because if Mother Teresa had been a Jewish icon we couldn't have published it."

RELIGION IN THE SCHOOLS

When the Catholic League learned that an anti-Catholic book was being used in a public school in Cooperstown, North Dakota, we immediately asked the superintendent of schools for an explanation. We are happy to report that the book will no longer be referenced by the teacher. Here's what happened.

Handouts from a book by Ralph Woodrow, *Babylon's Mystery Religion*, were being used by a teacher in his seventh grade social studies and tenth grade history classes at Griggs County Central Public School District. The book is loaded with evangelical anti-Catholic propaganda. Indeed, the author himself admits that his work is not historically accurate.

To make matters worse, Cutting Edge Book Reviews praised the work as "a basic handbook exposing the truth regarding the Roman Catholic system in a day when many 'evangelicals' are touting 'Christian Unity' with the Church of Rome." After the Catholic League registered its complaint, the teacher agreed to consult the World Book Encyclopedia instead.

On another front, Catholic parents in Westchester sued a school district when they learned that an altar was used at an Earth Day observance; third graders were also instructed to make cut-outs of an elephant-headed god. Such attention to the religious sensibilities of Catholics would never be countenanced, and this is especially true of Westchester schools; there have been many New Age-type practices observed there in recent years.

We get a lot of complaints from Catholic League members about school calendars which list Jewish holy days but not Christian ones. There is nothing illegal about these abuses, so it is up to local residents to complain. Mary Buse, a Catholic League member from Cincinnati, did just that and got what she was looking for—an even playing field. Members take note!

A kindergartner from a suburban community in Syracuse expressed his concern for the environment by including a reference to God in his artwork. The religious-cleansing police, known as teacher and principal, naturally muzzled the child's freedom of speech by censoring his First Amendment rights. It's now in the courts.

After decades of the failed experiment in non-judgmental "value free" education, character education is now all the rage. But some are worried that by teaching character, religion might slip in the door. Tom Brokaw, on NBC Nightly News, expressed the worst fears of many when he introduced the topic on November 2: "Character education—a good idea or a blatant violation of your child's civil rights"? That would seem to suggest that Johnny's rights are being duly respected by teaching him that there is no such thing as right and wrong.

Of course, many of these problems could be solved if parents had a right to send their children to the school of their choice. But the same folks who think it is a "blatant violation" of liberty to teach right from wrong are the same ones who oppose school choice. On this score, a recent U.S. Supreme Court decision is most welcome.

Everyone who follows school-choice initiatives has been watching Cleveland. A successful voucher program there was put on hold at the beginning of the new academic year when a Federal Judge barred new entrants into the program. But now the high court, agreeing with an appeal from Ohio's Attorney General, has ruled that new students can join the program while a U.S. District court considers all the evidence.

The voucher issue is one that continues to get knocked around in the courts. That's because there's more than legalities involved in this one.

ABORTION CLINIC SPONSORS BIGOTRY

An abortion clinic in West Palm Beach, Florida, is distributing anti-Catholic literature sponsored by the Catholic bashing group, Catholics for a Free Choice. Father Thomas Euteneuer of Holy Cross Catholic Church brought this issue to our attention, but neither he nor the Catholic League have succeeded in getting the clinic's director, Mona Reis, to cease and desist.

In his letter to Reis, William Donohue said, "Jews for Jesus is an organization which, if promoted by Catholics, would rightly be seen as a slap at Jews. For someone who is Jewish to promote Catholics for a Free Choice is equally offensive—it is a slap at Catholics."

Donohue asked Reis to stop distributing Catholics for a Free Choice literature. You can write to her at Presidential Women's Center, 1501 Presidential Way, Suite 19, West Palm Beach, Florida 33401.

EDUCATING AN EDUCATOR

The State University of New York (SUNY) at New Paltz is headed by President Roger Bowen. He got into the newspapers last year when he defended a pornographic showcase on his campus called "Revolting Behavior: The Challenge of Women's Sexual Freedom." Among other things, the sex conference featured a sex-toy

sale, a round-table conversation on sadomasochism and a workshop on female masturbation. Oh, yes, anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism also marked the event.

Well, it just so happens that William Donohue had an opportunity to talk with President Bowen recently about another sex-scandal on his campus. This one involved Christianity. What follows is a step-by-step description of what happened.

On October 22, four color photos arrived in the mail at the office of the Catholic League. The pictures were of the artwork of a former student at SUNY New Paltz; the art was hung from the ceiling at the Majors Art Studio on campus. It consisted of four large penises shaped like a cross with a huge piece of a red-like substance that resembled the Sacred Heart of Jesus placed behind it. The offending artwork was sent by a current student on the campus. The student is Jewish.

When Donohue received the photos, he called Bowen's office. The secretary said he was out of the office but would be back shortly. When she asked what this was in reference to, Donohue simply said, "The penises." Shocked, the secretary pressed Donohue to be more explicit. "You know, the penises that are hanging in the Majors Art Studio on campus shaped like a cross." He explained who he was and urged her to have Bowen call him.

Bowen called that afternoon. He admitted that there was such a thing and set out to describe it to Donohue. When Donohue brought Bowen's attention to other aspects of the art, the SUNY New Paltz president was astonished Donohue knew so much. "I have the pictures in front of me," Donohue said. "You have pictures?" "Yes." "How did you get them?" "A student sent them to me." "A student?" "Yes." "What's his name?" "None of your business."

When Donohue asked Bowen if he was offended by the art, he said no. Donohue then wondered whether this was because it didn't offend his religion. "Well, what if we took a picture of you and blew it up and placed it behind the penises," questioned Donohue. "Would you be offended by that?" "Yes, I would." "Good. Now you know what offends me and I know what offends you. We're making progress."

Bowen then lapsed into a lecture on the First Amendment. Donohue listened and said, "What are you going to do with the art?" "It should be disposed of," Bowen said, explaining that the student had graduated and it should be taken down. He then said that he would go to see the art professors about it right then and there had it not been that it was Friday afternoon and most professors aren't working. Donohue said he understood perfectly, stating that he was a professor for 16 years and was well aware that professors don't work on Friday afternoons. "Come to think of it," Donohue chimed, "some don't work at all."

Bowen then asked if Donohue was the same person who was involved in leading the protest on the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Donohue assured him he was. Bowen then asked about Donohue's credentials, questioning what subject he wrote about. "The First Amendment," Donohue said.

Donohue told Bowen he wanted him to get back to him in a week to find out what happened to the art. Bowen agreed but did not call. On October 29, Donohue called again but was told that Bowen wasn't available. On November 2, Bowen called to say that the art had been removed. But he hastened to add that he was not buckling to outside pressure. Donohue said fine and then directed him to a big article that the *New York Times* had done on him that day. He told Bowen it would explain who we are in the event we meet again.

EVANGELICAL NONSENSE

There they go fighting the Reformation again. It is with this sense of exasperation that we read an article in the Evangelical publication, *World*. The name of the piece, “On the eve of saints,” contains the ruminations of Andree Sec, a Catholic-turned-Evangelical who has a need to vent in public.

Sec isn’t too worried about Halloween, he tells his readers, but he is upset with the next day, All Saints Day. Sec rejects the Catholic Church’s teachings on sainthood. Fine. Who cares? But he can’t leave it alone: he wants everyone to know that Jesus is the patron of lost causes and all who believe in Him are saints. Speaking of his Catholic upbringing, Sec muses that “I perceive that in every way we [his family] were very religious and huddled together in fear.” Now that he’s liberated it’s too bad Saint Andree can’t move on.

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART HOSTS ANTI-NUN FILM

This fall, New York’s Museum of Modern Art played host for the premiere of “Women In Black,” a one-hour documentary on Catholic nuns produced and directed by Claudia Sherwood. The film was described as a “kaleidoscope of baby boomers’ memories” that featured “childhood experiences of physical and psychological punishment during their education by Catholic nuns, especially in the 1950s and 1960s.”

When William Donohue learned of this, he offered his thoughts on the subject to the press and made sure to share them with Ms. Sherwood. Here they are:

“Much of the Catholic bashing these days comes from adult ex-Catholics who are stuck in their adolescence. Claudia Sherwood is such a person. Stuck in the morass of her Catholic school experience of the late Fifties and early Sixties, she now wants to wallow in it while trying to make a fast buck off of her exploits. It is not surprising that her film gives profile to Christopher Durang and Albert Innaurato, two embittered anti-Catholic playwrights who met at Yale and have yet to move on.

“It was so nice of Ms. Sherwood to flag her little flick for me by sending along a useful packet of information. I was particularly taken by her comment to me that no one in the Church has ever apologized for the Catholic schools of her era, thus suggesting that she might yet get one. The same kind of psychological malady is apparent when she admits that when she was working on her project, she actually ‘became ill at times when research required me to contact the archdiocese, a nun or clergy.’ Had I known this, I would have provided her with one of our now-famous vomit bags.

“‘When I visited the Archdiocese building in New York I was panic stricken,’ she says. Too bad she didn’t know at the time that I work there—perhaps we could have met. I could have comforted her by showing compassion and engaging in dialogue, and instead she went home sobbing.”

Quotable: The Catholic League, as described in the November 15 edition of *Time* magazine: “a lay group with 350,000 members and an intimidating letterhead...” While we’re not sure what constitutes an “intimidating” letterhead, we’re mighty glad *Time* didn’t find it wimpy. Such scrutiny suggests, however, that *Time* keeps as close an eye on us as we do on them.