

# MEL GIBSON'S FOES OVERHEAT; SMEAR CAMPAIGN BACKFIRES

Critics of Mel Gibson's film, "The Passion of Christ," are becoming unhinged, but their smear campaign is backfiring.

For example, on November 6, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) convened its 90th Annual National Meeting at New York's Plaza Hotel. One of the sessions explored the controversy over the film.

Paula Fredriksen, professor of theology at Boston University, commented that the movie was "inflammatory," saying it was in the "toxic tradition of blaming Jews for the death of Jesus." She also predicted that the film "could very possibly elicit violence against Jews." Fredriksen has not seen the movie.

Sister Mary C. Boys, professor of Judeo-Christian Studies, Union Theological Seminary, ridiculed Gibson for saying he believed he was guided by the Holy Spirit in making the movie. "I don't believe that [given the divisive result] that he could claim that the Holy Spirit is behind this." Boys has not seen the movie.

Abraham H. Foxman, the ADL's national director, said Gibson was riddled with prejudice: "I think he's infected—seriously infected—with some very, very serious anti-Semitic views." Foxman has not seen the movie.

The only ADL official to see the movie is Rabbi Eugene Korn. Almost alone in his critical view of the film, Korn nonetheless couldn't stomach the overheated style of Foxman. So he quit. His resignation comes at a time when many Jewish leaders are questioning the ADL's strategy.

Elan Steinberg, an official of the World Jewish Congress, openly wondered whether Jews were alienating "those who are

our allies in many struggles.” Gilbert Rosenthal of the National Council of Synagogues also said the ADL’s approach was backfiring. Rabbi Michael Cook, a Hebrew Union professor, warned that Jews who are predicting violence following the film “risk embarrassment when it hits the theaters.”

Other Jewish critics of the ADL’s strong-armed approach include Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, president of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, and Rabbi Daniel Lapin of Toward Tradition.

Orthodox Jewish film critic Michael Medved said it best when he accused Foxman of “marginalizing himself.” Medved really unloaded when he commented that Foxman’s campaign “is provoking far more anti-Semitism than the movie itself ever could.”

This is what happens when an advocacy campaign overheats. The Catholic League, of course, not only issues statements of support for Mel Gibson, we publicly chastise his harshest critics

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## **CRECHE CASE IN THE COURTS**

On November 13, oral arguments were heard in U.S. District Court regarding a lawsuit that maintains that the New York City school system discriminates against Christians. Suing the New York City schools is The Thomas More Law Center of Ann Arbor, Michigan; the Catholic League began the process and secured a complainant for the law firm.

The dispute originated in 2001, when a Catholic woman who teaches in the New York City public schools contacted the Catholic League complaining that her principal was inviting Jewish and Muslim teachers to bring religious symbols into the

classroom in December to celebrate Hanukkah and Ramadan; Christian teachers were told they could bring secular symbols like the Christmas tree.

At first we thought this was an anomaly. But then we discovered it was the official policy of the Board of Education. A flurry of exchanges between William Donohue and the attorney for New York City schools ensued. Because the City would not budge, Donohue threatened to sue. He then spoke to Richard Thompson, president of The Thomas More Law Center, who said that if the league could secure a plaintiff, his firm would do the litigating.

After this was reported in *Catalyst*, we were contacted by league member Andrea Skoros. She lives in Queens, sends her children to public schools, was outraged over the City's policy, and agreed to be party to the suit.

A decision by the judge could come at any time.

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## WHY THE SCANDAL WILL CONTINUE

**William A. Donohue**

The *Boston Globe* broke the story on the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church in January 2002. Two years later, it is evident the scandal will not go away. Don't get me wrong—it is neither enabling bishops nor molesting priests who are prolonging the scandal—it is a diverse group of people who have an ideological, emotional or pecuniary interest in making sure the clock keeps ticking.

To be more specific, there are Catholic bashers in the media who won't let go of it. Working alongside of them is another

band of ideologues—Catholics in our own ranks for whom the scandal is manna from heaven: they are the “I-told-you-so” gang of reformers who are seizing the moment to advance their agenda. Some of the victims’ advocates, as well as some of the victims themselves, are so emotionally invested that they are impervious to reason; nothing can comfort them. Even worse are those psychologists who—in their own sick way—wallow in this kind of stuff. And, of course, there are some lawyers who are so inflamed by hate and greed that only an exorcism could cure them.

When news of the scandal was first breaking, it made sense to think that more bad news would soon follow. Similarly, immediately after Cardinal Law resigned, many Catholics voiced concerns that the scandal may not have run its course. These people are not a problem. The ones who are a problem are precisely those who, for reasons listed above, have a vested interest in milking the scandal for all it is worth. Here’s a sample of their despair over the last two years.

Edward Greenan is the Rhode Island coordinator for Voice of the Faithful. Dick Ryan is an active member and promoter of the group from Long Island. One of his counterparts in Syracuse is Jane Fraser. All have told the press that “this is just the beginning.” Margery Egan, talk-show host in Boston, waxes romantic with her refrain, “[this is] the beginning of bringing the Church home.”

Then there are those who smugly remark to the media that “this is only the tip of the iceberg.” Those who prefer this phraseology include: Widener University professor William R. Stayton; Ohio victims’ attorney Bob Steinberg; dissident Catholic theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether; national Voice of the Faithful leader Steve Krueger; Virginia Voice of the Faithful spokesman Wayne Koch; and Susan Archibald, president of the victims’ group Linkup.

Rodney Ford, an alleged victim who has gotten plenty of media

attention, likes to say that the crisis in Boston “will never end.” Similarly, Father Thomas Doyle, an embittered priest, predicts “there is no end in sight.” Outdoing both of them is Dr. Mary Gail Frawley-O’Dea, a sex-abuse psychologist and advisor to the bishops: “You will see some kind of a bubble in 2005, when the people who were abused in the 1990s come forward.” It remains to be seen whether her bubble will burst in 2006 when 2005 turns out to be a bust.

Then there are the Catholic experts who never tire of telling us that the scandal is a systemic failure. It is not a matter of human failing, they instruct, it’s emblematic of an institutional failing so deep as to require radical surgery. This is the perspective of such popular dissidents as Notre Dame priest Richard McBrien, ex-priest Eugene Kennedy, ex-priest James Carroll, ex-priest Daniel Maguire, ex-priest Richard Sipe and ex-seminarian Garry Wills. (Their mostly “ex” status fits perfectly with the picture of despair profiled in this piece.) In sum, they want us to believe that it’s the barrel that stinks—not a few rotten apples.

In temperament and outlook, these people remind me of some of the college professors with whom I worked for 16 years. Personally and socially dysfunctional, they were alienated from their students, their colleagues, their country, Western Civilization and God. That is why they were perennially depressed. One of the tell-tale signs of such people is an inability to smile, save for those instances when it’s done at someone else’s expense.

So the scandal is not about to go away anytime too soon. There is a veritable cottage industry of Catholic bashers, dissidents, victims’ advocates, psychologists and lawyers who will see to it that this is dragged on *ad infinitum*. It is not a conspiracy in the sense that this is planned; rather, it is a coming together of some totally dispirited souls over a particularly unhappy chapter in the Catholic Church. Frank Sinatra had the best advice of anyone. Of adversity, he

shrugged, "That's Life." When it strikes, he said, "I just pick myself up and get back in the race." Somebody needs to sing that song to the malcontents, lest they stay down for the count.

Merry Christmas to everyone. Including those who need to get back in the race.

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## **"60 MINUTES" ATTACKS PADRE PIO AND MOTHER TERESA**

*By Father Benedict Groeschel, C.F.R.*

Shortly after Sunday, October 12, I was saddened to receive phone calls of outrage from friends who had watched a cynical attack on Padre Pio and Mother Teresa on the CBS show "60 Minutes." I was saddened because of the time people wasted watching this program, which like so much of the secular media has a strong anti-Catholic bias.

Please, if you insist on watching this stuff, be sure to do a little penance afterward. Write or e-mail the sponsors and tell them you will not buy their products until they stop giving their advertising dollars to TV programs that present offensive garbage like this. *And then follow through.* I am very serious about this. I know from experience that we have been able to bring some of the mighty down in this way.

Of course, this show gave the appearance of being objective, giving both sides of the story. It was, as always, a trap. Very well informed people, like Msgr. Robert Sarno, were placed opposite critics like Rev. Richard McBrien, who repeatedly attacked the canonization of Saint Pio on the basis

that he simply did not believe in extraordinary events that are reported in Saint Pio's life. So what? I have just reviewed a transcript of the "60 Minutes" program, and I find it an insult to me personally because I am devoted to both of the saints who were ridiculed on the program. I should mention that I was part of CBS's coverage of Mother Teresa's funeral, and that day they were singing a different tune. ABC, on the other hand, which to me stands for Always-Bashing-Catholics, had on Christopher Hitchens with his outrageous commentary at Mother Teresa's funeral. God bless the Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists of India—they honored this great woman, who has been declared Mother of India.

I am very familiar with the exacting process of canonization. For almost two decades I have been diocesan postulator of the cause of Cardinal Terence Cooke. In addition, I knew Mother Teresa for well over thirty years, and I received a remarkable blessing in an astonishing way from Padre Pio. Therefore, I would like briefly to take on Rev. McBrien, as well as Christopher Hitchens, who wrote a scurrilous book about Mother Teresa.

Let's begin with McBrien's hostile observations about Padre Pio. I suspect he has never seen a person with the stigmata. In my book, *A Still, Small Voice* (Ignatius Press), I seriously examine the nature of reported supernatural phenomena and consider the different possibilities ranging from the psychosomatic to the miraculous. I don't think any of the several stigmatics I have examined exhibited supernatural markings; in fact, I was able to help one devout and sincere person recover from this unusual symptom. Uniformly these wounds were superficial—something like blood blisters. Padre Pio's wounds were deep, and they bled constantly but without any infection. Although I have scientific training and a degree, I need not simply dismiss *a priori* something I do not understand or something that does not fit into my range of experience or my prejudices. To do so would be eminently

unscientific.

The fact is that stigmata are paranormal phenomena (a scientific term referring to things having no scientific explanation at present), examples of which have been investigated for centuries since a nobleman roughly examined the wounds of Saint Francis at his funeral. Padre Pio's wounds were undoubtedly the most examined stigmata in history. Naturally, many stories and legends began to develop around such a person. Nevertheless, it is simply illogical to dismiss all such reports out of hand, as McBrien does, by saying, "I don't believe any of that." That incredible response tells you nothing about Padre Pio; it might tell you something about McBrien. One needs to review the evidence. In Padre Pio's case, this is not difficult for anyone to do.

Several serious and sober biographies of Padre Pio are available. One that reports and sifts all the evidence is *Padre Pio: The True Story* (Our Sunday Visitor) by a Lutheran pastor and well-known biographer, Pastor C. Bernard Ruffin. He gives a careful account of the many reported paranormal phenomena in Padre Pio's life, as well as the reaction of skeptics and the response of this humble and most generous friar to the mysterious things that happened to him. The extraordinary phenomena, including reports of what is called bilocation, are often very well documented by competent witnesses. But none of these extraordinary things were evidence for Padre Pio's canonization. What was taken into account when considering his sanctity were his life and virtues, his behavior in the face of these unsought mysterious phenomena, and his humility and generosity. His concern for others is seen in the great hospital he built with offerings given to him and the Capuchin friars. Yet Bob Simon, the "60 Minutes" co-host, disparaged the Capuchins in a most insidious way.

The following quotation from Pastor Ruffin's biography sums up his research on Padre Pio, and casts McBrien's statement, "I



don't believe any of that," into a ridiculous light:

"Even the most cursory reading of Sacred Scripture will reveal that the sanctity to which all Christians are called is a total, absolute, and unconditional dedication and surrender of the self to God in Christ Jesus. Padre Pio lived this commitment in a striking and intense way. Whatever one may think of his *charismata*, the propriety of his offering himself as a Victim of Divine Love, whatever one's opinion may be of his ministry or his theology, or even of his personality, there can be no doubt that Padre Pio gave himself over entirely to his Lord. The most fervent atheist will be forced to admit, even if he believes that the padre dedicated his life to a delusion, that his commitment was total. His entire life was given over to God and to the service of mankind. The only thing Padre Pio cared about in this world was saving souls. To him, every soul was the object of a concern so powerful that he was willing to immolate himself in its behalf.

"Padre Pio was a man who, like all men, was influenced by his family, by his environment, by his education. . . . He was, unlike most men and women, an individual who had surrendered himself *totally* to his Savior, Christ, a man who strove from childhood to his last breath to be an imitator of Christ. No suffering—physical, spiritual, or emotional—was so great as to stay him in this mission. When his total dedication to his faith is considered on the basis of Scripture as well as of Christian tradition, no one can seriously deny that Padre Pio was—and is—one of history's greatest exemplars of Christian humanity."

I know several sophisticated people—including a nonbeliever—to whom Padre Pio revealed the state of their souls. Indeed, there was one very dark moment in my own life when I had been misjudged and hurt by people who later apologized. Within two minutes of the axe falling on me, I received a personal note from Padre Pio. I had never had any contact with him, but I

did admire him. This little message of hope and encouragement, written in his own hand on the back of a devotional card, made all the difference in the world to a young man who should have been crushed but was not. Unlike McBrien, I have every reason to believe that Padre Pio is a saint of God.

Now for Christopher Hitchens' continuing vicious attacks on Mother Teresa. Out of the many calumnies he has made about Mother Teresa, he chose to present her in his book, *The Missionary Position*, as a religious fanatic, uninterested in the poor, concerned only in making converts. During the thirty-two years when I knew Mother Teresa well, I never observed in her behavior anything like fanaticism. Moreover, he distorts her quotations on the nature of charity toward the poor. The following excerpt is from a letter Mother Teresa wrote to the Missionaries of Charity on the subject of charity; it brings together her love for God and her tender compassion and love for her neighbor in a life of great spiritual darkness known only to a few.

"Try to increase your knowledge of the mystery of redemption. This knowledge will lead you to love, and love will make you share through your sacrifice in the passion of Christ. My dear children, without suffering our work would just be social work—very good and helpful, but it would not be the work of Jesus Christ, not part of the redemption. Jesus wanted to help us by sharing our life, our loneliness, our agony and death. All that He has taken upon Himself and has carried it in the darkest night. Only by being one with us has He redeemed us. We are able to do the same. All the desolation of the poor people, not only their material poverty but their spiritual destitution, must be redeemed, and we must have our share in it. Pray thus when you find it hard: I wish to live in this world which is so far from God, which has turned so much from the light of Jesus, to help them—to take upon myself something of their suffering. Yes, my dear children, let us share the sufferings of the poor, for only by being one with them can we

redeem them; that is bringing God into their lives and bringing them to God.”

Hitchens’ wholly distorted picture of Mother Teresa reminds us of a remark of Josef Goebbels, Hitler’s propaganda minister: “Don’t tell a little lie; no one will believe you. Tell a big lie, and everyone will believe you.”

I can say categorically that Hitchens’ characterization of Mother Teresa is a scurrilous distortion of a truly great human being. When a supposedly Catholic publication ran an article several years ago mocking the Missionaries of Charity for their sari, which they said looked like a dish towel, I wrote a rebuttal, which was never printed. I wrote my response despite Mother Teresa’s disapproval. She had lots of critics, and she prayed for them all but never answered them. She used to say, “It is not between me and them; it is between me and God, and them and God.”

I pray to Padre Pio and Mother Teresa, and I ask you to pray for the conversion of McBrien, Hitchens, and Simon, and the whole crew at “60 Minutes.” I ask you to pray for my conversion too. We’re going to need it. After all, in the end it is between each of us and God.

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# **BISHOPS CONVENE AMIDST GOOD**

# NEWS

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) met November 10-13 in Washington, D.C. for their annual meeting. They did so amidst good news from two surveys of Roman Catholics.

The results of a Gallup survey were reported on November 7 in the *New York Times*. It showed that 49 percent of Catholics say they feel the bishops are doing a good job; this was up from 35 percent a year ago.

In a related story in the same day's *Washington Post*, we learned from a study done by researchers at Georgetown University that Catholics were more generous in their donations in 2002 than they were the previous year. The 5 percent increase was substantial—it was twice the rate of inflation. And considering that 2002 was the year that news of the scandal broke, and the market went south, the results are startling. With the Church on the mend, and the market picking up, it looks like 2003 will be an even better year for the Church.

“The good news comes at a time when the bishops need to take a serious look at who their real friends are,” we told the media. We drew attention to a three-day meeting in Milwaukee by the radical reform group, Call to Action; the group met the weekend before the USCCB conference. This is the same group that holds funds in escrow for members in parishes unhappy with church operations. Moreover, the same group has taken out ads in secular newspapers calling for a boycott of dioceses it doesn't like.

Then there is Voice of the Faithful. On November 10, the day the bishops convened in Washington, it held a press conference across the street from where the USCCB met. It demanded, among other things, financial accountability. This group also holds

hundreds of thousands of dollars in escrow from parishioners who are unhappy with diocesan operations. It is the same group that collects money from Catholics to be given to the local diocese on the condition that the local Ordinary spend the money according to its dictates. And they are lecturing the bishops on financial accountability!

“In essence,” we said in a news release, “the surveys indicate that lay Catholics are coming back to the fold, save for those who seek to control the Church.”

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## **DEBATE OVER SCHOOL VOUCHERS GETS UGLY IN MILWAUKEE**

In October, in the debate over school vouchers in Milwaukee, the Wisconsin state legislature considered an amendment to a school-choice bill that would require background checks of voucher-school employees. State Senator Gwendolynne Moore, who pushed for the measure, said she wanted to vest this authority in the Milwaukee Department of Public Instruction. The Milwaukee Archdiocese already conducts background checks, but this was not deemed sufficient by Moore.

State Senator Moore did not confine her remarks to the issue at hand. Instead, she repeatedly cited the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church. Those who objected to her amendment were accused of protecting “rapists.” Worse, she said the voucher schools would become a magnet for pedophile priests. She even opined that because private (non-Catholic) schools are not required to conduct background checks, predatory men who were thinking about entering a seminary might elect instead to teach in one of these schools.

Time and again we have seen that some opponents of school choice find it difficult to stay focused on the issue—they simply can't resist taking a sucker punch against the Catholic Church. Before the scandal, they would argue that the Church was simply motivated by greed in advocating voucher programs. Now they maintain that opportunities to prey on the young are at work. And in the fertile imagination of State Senator Gwen Moore, Catholic men who think they have a vocation may decide to follow their real vocation in life—to molest kids—by signing up to teach in a private, non-parochial school.

It is not enough for the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* to write an exemplary editorial denouncing Moore for her remarks. That is why William Donohue wrote to State Senator Jon Erpenbach, the leader of the Senate Democrats in the Wisconsin legislature, asking him to personally intervene in this matter by getting Senator Moore to apologize to area Catholics. We are awaiting his reply.

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## **DEMOCRATS LINKED TO CATHOLIC BASHING**

On November 11, a group allied with the Democratic Party released a public statement branding all Catholic bishops liars. The group, Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC), made the charge in a news release: "Congress, AIDS advocates, and public urged to protest Catholic cardinals' and bishops' lying about condoms' effectiveness to fight AIDS."

The statement came as the bishops were meeting in Washington for their annual meeting. The Democratic National Committee (DNC) provides a link on its website to CFFC and has resisted

calls to end its relationship with the anti-Catholic organization.

Here is what we told the media in a news release of our own:

“The Democrats are now in a bind: they can either dump Catholics for a Free Choice or explain why they shouldn’t. The Democrats, in their eagerness to support abortion rights, have needlessly sided with an anti-Catholic group. For the party of compassion and civil rights to associate with a group that is publicly flaunting its contempt for Catholicism is astonishing. It is also suicidal.

“Do the Democratic candidates running for president believe the Catholic bishops are a bunch of liars? If not, will they say the time has finally come to break off all relations with these bigots? Surely the Democrats have more to lose than gain by sticking with those who seek to alienate millions of Catholics.”

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## **DNC TRIES TO PLAY ITS CATHOLIC CARD**

Jenny Backus, a Democratic consultant who has helped organize the Democratic National Committee (DNC) debates, was recently cited in news reports about the alleged diversity of the Democratic candidates for president. Here’s what she said: “We’ve got everybody from a preacher to a general, from the leader of the House to leaders in the Senate, north to south, Jewish, Catholic, Baptist.”

Jenny Backus is right—there are Catholics running for president on the Democratic ticket. In fact, at least three of

the nine candidates are Catholic: Carol Moseley Braun, John Kerry and Dennis Kucinich are all Roman Catholics. (It is not clear what Wesley Clark is: his father was Jewish, he was raised a Baptist, then converted to Catholicism, and now attends a Presbyterian church.) Unfortunately, they all carry the same baggage, and that is why it is not smart for the DNC to try to play its Catholic card.

None of these Catholics has yet to speak out against the outrageous association between the DNC and Catholics for a Free Choice, the nation's most notoriously anti-Catholic organization. To this day, despite repeated requests, the DNC maintains a link on its website to this despicable group. Though all the candidates have been contacted about this issue, none has yet shown the courage to address it.

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## DEMOCRATS STAGE PRAYER FEST WITH MUSLIMS

On November 12, several Democratic congressmen joined American Muslim leaders in holding a Ramadan iftar, or fast breaking dinner, in the House Judiciary Committee Hearing Room.

According to a news release by the Council on American-Islamic Relations issued the day before the event, "The Capitol Hill iftar will include breaking of the fast with water and dates, *the call to prayer (adhan), the Islamic sunset prayer (maghrib), an ecumenical prayer by a Muslim religious leader, and remarks by the congressional hosts.*" (Emphasis added.)

We immediately contacted the press with the following news release:

"Practicing Catholic aspirants to the federal bench like



Alabama Attorney General Bill Pryor are denied a vote by Democrats in the Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing room, but their colleagues in the House can stage a prayer fest with Muslims in the House Judiciary Committee Room. Anyone who sings 'Silent Night' next month in a public school is likely to be either reprimanded or arrested, and allowing kids to utter the dreaded words 'under God' in the Pledge of Allegiance is deemed so threatening to our freedoms that the U.S. Supreme Court must intervene. But our elected officials—the very ones who promote censorship of religious speech for Christians—are now going to pray with Muslims in the Rayburn House Office Building.

"Needless to say, the Catholic League has no problem with public celebrations of Ramadan, and we certainly wish Muslims well. No, our problem is with these hypocritical public officials—the way things are going we may soon need an affirmative action program for Christians so they can catch up with their newly arrived Islamic brothers."

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## **BILL O'REILLY: UNFAIR AND IMBALANCED**

In Bill O'Reilly's latest book, *Who's Looking Out for You?*, he launches a salvo at the Catholic League. "The anger I feel for the witch-hunters of America is off the charts," he says on p. 184. This is followed by, "The Catholic League of America issued a press release after my criticism of the Pope, charging I 'despised him.'"

A couple of small points. First of all, we are the Catholic League, not the Catholic League of America. William Donohue

has previously charged that O'Reilly has shown contempt for the Pope—he never said O'Reilly despises the pope. What really matters, however, is O'Reilly's failure to point out to the reader exactly what created the furor in the first place.

It was on March 13 that O'Reilly criticized the pope for allegedly not having "a position on Saddam [Hussein]." After commenting on the brutality of Saddam Hussein's regime, O'Reilly said, "And then the pope sits in Rome and says, gee, this is terrible, but does not throw his moral authority behind removing this dictator." This comment by O'Reilly was preceded a week earlier when he said, "I have never liked this pope. I have always felt he was an autocrat who had no vision about how people live in the real world."

In his book, O'Reilly never lets the reader know that it was these words that led Donohue to charge him with having contempt for the pope. Instead, he simply says he was criticized by the Catholic League, and for this we are tagged as "witch-hunters."

This is one guy who can dish it out but can't take it. His unfair and imbalanced approach is one reason why a lot of his former fans no longer have any use for him.