

CATHOLICS MOCKED BY ARTISTS

In November, Cleveland area artists held a fundraising party for SPACES, a local art gallery. The *Plain Dealer* gave high profile to the event, including photos of the Catholic baiting participants.

The three photos that accompanied the story on the “Saint Misbehavin” party showed a picture of a woman dressed as Santa Anna and a man dressed as St. John the Baptist; another photo featured a man dressed as St. Francis of Assisi, a man outfitted as the devil and a woman dressed in a see-through Communion gown, wearing nothing but a bra and panties (she was identified as “a naughty First Communion girl”); the third photo was of a woman posing as Mary and a man posing as Joseph.

The league sent a letter to the newspaper explaining its objections; the *Plain Dealer* published the letter. The league commented that “the event spoke volumes about what passes as humor in some parts of the artistic community. Poking fun at Catholic saints and mocking Holy Eucharist may innocent to those intoxicated with relativism, but to those of us who still believe there are some things that are sacred, it appears to be coarse at best, and bigoted at worse.”

Some of the league’s criticism was directed at the newspaper itself: “Why the *Plain Dealer* gave such a high profile to this event is itself noteworthy. Had the revelers dressed up as Amos and Andy, it is a sure bet the editors would either have spiked the story or held it up for disdain. Why they didn’t give Roman Catholics like treatment is a telling commentary on the newspaper.”

SALVI WAS “OBSESSED” WITH CATHOLICISM?

John Salvi, the deranged man who went on a killing spree in two Brookline, Massachusetts abortion clinics in 1994, was a Catholic. Here is how the ABC affiliate in New York described him on the news: “John Salvi was a young man obsessed with his Catholic religion.” Now when was the last time anyone remembers hearing how “obsessed” Dr. Kevorkian is with his atheism?

Even more interesting is the fact that in the same broadcast, there was a story about Mother Teresa, yet there was no mention of how her “obsession” with Catholicism accounts for her altruism. Guess “obsessed” Catholics only commit crimes.

VICTORY FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

It took the Supreme Court to decide it was okay for Christian school clubs to have Christian officers. In 1993, the Roslyn Free School District on Long Island denied a student the right to limit officers in her Bible club to Christians. The school district claimed that such a measure was discriminatory and the student argued that her religious freedom rights would be violated if she yielded. In December, the Supreme Court sided with the student.

CHRISTMAS CARDS WE WOULDN'T RECOMMEND

Recycled Paper Greetings publishes cards that are supposed to be funny. Some are. But others are offensive. To Catholics, that is.

The 1996 catalog of Hanukkah and Christmas cards offers many examples of what passes as humor at Recycled Paper Greetings. While many could be objected to, the league decided to concentrate its efforts on the two most offensive cards. Both of them assault Our Blessed Mother in a most vulgar way.

One of the cards is entitled "Three Wise Men Feeling Mary" (actually, "Mary" is crossed out and above it "Merry" is substituted). The illustration shows three men ogling a woman, one of whom is shown laying his hands on her. Inside the card, it says "Wishing You A Very Mary Christmas."

The other card is a photo of the backside of a naked woman with a red bow tie around her waist. It says, "Hi! I'm Mary. Mary Little." Inside it reads "Have yourself a Mary Little Christmas."

The league wrote to Mike Keiser, the president of the company, asking that he discontinue these two cards. It should also be mentioned that none of the Hanukkah cards show this level of disrespect for the Jewish holiday. Moreover, while there are Hanukkah cards that make fun of Christmas, there are no Christmas cards that make fun of Hanukkah.

BOYCOTT TARGET STORES

Catholics in Buffalo were astonished to learn that Target Stores, a discount chain, refused a donation to a Catholic school on the grounds that "Catholic schools are not part of the community."

The Catholic League calls on all Catholics to boycott Target Stores. The chain is known for its generous donations to Planned Parenthood.

SHOWTIME OFFERS DOUBLE WHAMMY

In December, the cable station, Showtime, aired two programs that were clearly targeted at Catholics, and in a most offensive way. On December 9, it showed *Critical Choices*, and on December 8 and 13, it aired *Sherman Oaks*.

Critical Choices is a movie that takes place over Easter Weekend, beginning with Holy Thursday; it opens with a shot of the Pope on his hands and knees washing the feet of the bishops. A character played by Pamela Reed is portrayed as an anti-abortion extremists. Not surprisingly, she is a homely, dowdy person who contrasts sharply with a liberal pro-abortion advocate, played by Diana Scarwid; she is an attractive career woman.

There are shots taken in a church and a priest is introduced as a revenge-seeking militant. The priest provokes the anti-abortion woman's husband to place a bomb in an abortion clinic. The woman is seen reciting The Memorare and a gay man is sympathetically portrayed as a victim of anti-abortion zealots.

Sherman Oaks was worse. A seductive blond finds it hard to believe that a man she has met at a health club is a priest. "A priest, my ass," she comments. This is followed with the quip, "You're going to tell me the bulge between your legs is a chalice, right?" The woman appears topless in the show, has an affair with the priest and generally makes derogatory comments about priests.

Both shows triggered a letter to Showtime president Aaron Donaldson. *Catalyst* readers can write to him at 1633 Broadway, New York, New York 10019.

LEAGUE THREATENS ACTION AGAINST SCHOOL DISTRICT

The Catholic League has threatened to take action against a school district in Northwestern Pennsylvania. After learning that students were barred from creating artwork that depicted a nativity scene, Dr. Donohue sent the following letter to the offending party.

December 13, 1996

Ms. Alice Niebauer
President, Millcreek Township School District
Education Center
3740 W. 26th Street
Millcreek, PA 16506

Dear Ms. Niebauer:

It has been brought to my attention that art teachers in your district have been instructed not to allow nativity scenes in

this year's Christmas card contest. This is illegal.

Enclosed you will find the text of a memo that President Clinton sent to Attorney General Janet Reno and Secretary of Education Richard Riley last summer on the subject of religious expression in the schools. Maintaining that "our courts have reaffirmed" that "nothing in the First Amendment converts our public schools into religion-free zones or requires all religious expression to be left behind at the schoolhouse door," President Clinton went on to stress that "Students may express their beliefs about religion in the form of homework, artwork, and other written and oral assignments free of discrimination based on the religious content of their submissions."

The district's use of the term "Holiday Card Contest," as opposed to "Christmas Card Contest," is legal. However, it would not be illegal to use "Christmas Card Contest." I say this because the Supreme Court has upheld the constitutionality of a federal law that recognizes Christmas as a national holiday; indeed the Congress itself calls December 25 "Christmas" (see *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 675, 680 in 1984).

There are several courses of action that are available to the Catholic League regarding the illegal behavior of your school district. In the interest of fairness, however, this matter can be dropped quickly if you agree to take steps that will rectify this problem in the future. Please let me know what your decision is.

Sincerely,
William A. Donohue, Ph.D.
President

PUBLIC SCHOOLS SLIGHT CHRISTMAS

In December, the Catholic League was inundated with complaints across the country that public school teachers have been diluting the meaning of Christmas while simultaneously trumpeting the meaning of Hanukkah and Kwanzaa. It has become commonplace for public schools to teach about Hanukkah but not about Christmas, to display menorahs but not nativity scenes, and to celebrate the meaning of Kwanzaa but not Christmas.

The Catholic League issued the following comment to the press about this subject:

“In 1995, President Clinton sent a memo to Attorney General Janet Reno and Secretary of Education Richard Riley outlining the religious liberty rights of students in public schools. As he said, ‘nothing in the First Amendment converts our public schools into religion-free zones or requires all religious expression to be left behind at the schoolhouse door.’

“President Clinton was explicit about this matter: it is legal for teachers to teach about religion, for students to express their religious beliefs in their assignments, for students to distribute religious literature and to wear religious garb. Yet these rights are still being summarily ignored in certain school districts.

“In addition, it is now common practice for schools to display menorahs but not nativity scenes. Instead, the Christmas tree, which is not a religious symbol, is being displayed as though it were one. It must also be said that the sensitivity that many school districts are showing for Kwanzaa, which was literally invented in 1966, is in stark contrast to the way in which Christmas is being celebrated.

“While it is true that there is no law that requires public

schools to display nativity scenes or teach about Christmas, it is also true that there is no law that prohibits them from doing so. In the interest of fairness, then, it behooves school authorities to accommodate Christian students as much as they do Jewish and African-American students. That is why the Catholic League will continue to press for equitable treatment."

This edition of *Catalyst* discusses only some of the cases that it took regarding this matter.

DENIAL OF "RELEASE TIME" CHALLENGED SUCCESSFULLY

When the Catholic League learned that students in a Long Island public school were not being accommodated to attend religious instruction, it sent a letter directly to the superintendent of schools. Here is what the letter said.

December 2, 1996

Dr. Herman A. Sirois
Superintendent, Levittown Public Schools
Abbey Lane
Levittown, New York 11756

Dear Dr. Sirois:

It has been brought to my attention that the 7th grade students enrolled in chorus at Wisdom Lane School have been forced to choose between attending the Winter Concert on a night that regularly schedules religious instruction at a nearby Catholic school and missing their religion class. I

find this troubling for many reasons.

In 1952, the Supreme Court in *Zorach v. Clauson*, explicitly endorsed the "release time" program in New York State that allowed Catholic students who attend public schools to be released early from class so as to attend religious instruction. The majority opinion of the court, written by Justice William O. Douglas, said in part:

"We are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being. We guarantee the freedom to worship as one chooses. We make room for a wide variety of beliefs and creeds as the spiritual needs of man deem necessary. We sponsor an attitude on the part of government that shows no partiality to any one group and that lets each flourish.... When the state encourages religious instruction or cooperates with religious authorities by adjusting the schedule of public events to sectarian needs, it follows the best of our traditions. For it then respects the religious nature of our people and accommodates the public service to their spiritual needs."

It would seem, then, that a request made in October to switch the dates of the Winter Concert from Thursday night to say, Wednesday, was a reasonable exercise of this right (if this had been done, and a switch was made between the 6th grade students and the 7th grade students, then no one would have been adversely affected). But the request was denied by the chorus teacher.

Even worse, this same teacher contacted the local Catholic school and was told that students were allowed to miss two classes and remain in good standing, from which she decided that the Wisdom Lane Catholic students could afford to miss a class so as to attend the Winter Concert. In addition, the chorus teacher gave the students who couldn't attend the concert a report to do in lieu of their absence. When this issue was brought to the attention of the Vice Principal, no relief was given.

It is too late to correct this matter this year. But it is not too late to take initiatives that will avoid any such occurrence in the future. Obviously, "release time," like all constitutional rights, is not an absolute right, and no one is claiming that virtually any invocation of this right must be respected by public school officials. But given the clear letter of the law to "accommodate the spiritual needs of students" by "adjusting the schedule of public events to sectarian needs," it seems judicious to allow reasonable requests—such as this one—to be honored.

Please let me know your thoughts on this matter.

Sincerely,

William A. Donohue, Ph.D.

President

We are pleased with the outcome. On December 9, Herman Sirois wrote to Dr. Donohue explaining that "the incident to which you refer was an isolated one, and one which does not reflect district policy. To the contrary, the Levittown School District has provided its students with generous flexibility in the scheduling of and attendance at school events vis-a-vis individual religious obligations, including extensive provisions for early release for religious instruction."

The league expects that it will not have to revisit this issue with this particular school district next year.

NEW REPUBLIC FANS FLAMES OF

ANTI-CATHOLICISM

The cover article of the December 30th edition of the *New Republic* contained a piece by Jacob Heilbrunn that alleges there is a growing war between Catholic and Jewish conservatives. The article, "Neocon v. Theocon," maintains that Catholic intellectuals have alienated their Jewish neoconservative friends by pushing for a Thomistic understanding of American democracy. The piece is in large measure a response to a recently published symposium in *First Things*, the magazine edited by Father Richard John Neuhaus.

According to Heilbrunn, the "mostly Catholic intellectuals" who comprise the theocons "are attempting to construct a Christian theory of politics that directly threatens the entire neoconservative philosophy." He then adds that this venture is seen by some neocons (none is identified) as one which "directly threatens Jews." The public philosophy that is ascribed to Catholic writers is labeled "not so much anti-American as un-American."

Catholic League president William Donohue had this to say about the article:

"It is amazing that such a highly regarded publication as the *New Republic* would stoop to the level of Catholic baiting. Heilbrunn chooses a symposium in which three of the five contributors are non-Catholic (curiously, one of the wives is identified as a 'staunch Catholic'; it is not mentioned that one of the Catholic men is married to a Jewish woman) to argue that these articles are symbolic of some nefarious Catholic theory. Moreover, the organ that published the symposium isn't even Catholic, it's an interdenominational journal.

"By charging that a few Catholic scholars like Father Richard John Neuhaus and Robert George are threatening Jews, or that their ideas are 'un-American,' is as untrue as it is

unethical. Indeed, these two men have been leaders in fostering better relations between Catholics and Jews. What the *New Republic* is doing is promoting dissent among conservative intellectuals, not reporting on it. That it has chosen the club of anti-Catholicism to do so is reprehensible.

"There are millions of Americans of all faiths who believe that we have an imperial judiciary, and some of them are questioning the legitimacy of the political order. This conclusion is debatable, but it is no more grounded in Catholicism than it is Judaism. Worse, the attempt to brand it as un-American and Catholic-inspired has a familiar demagogic ring to it.

"The *New Republic* is not generally given to bigotry. It is hoped this incident does not signal a change from its past record of excellence."

Note: Because of the seriousness of this story, the Catholic League purchased a full-page ad in the *New Republic*. We published this news release.