

HBO OFFERS TABLOID LOOK AT CATHOLIC CHURCH

On May 6, Home Box Office aired *Priestly Sins: Sex and the Catholic Church*. The one hour special focused on the issue of sexual abuse in the priesthood. We were told that the problem is one of "epic" proportions and that the root cause is celibacy. The Catholic League issued the following news release on the film and called for a boycott of HBO:

"The HBO production, *Priestly Sins*, is to serious scholarship what the *Enquirer* is to serious journalism. Tabloid sensationalism has a market, but it was not known until now that HBO was a player in this field.

"The film is classic propaganda, moving from anecdote to generalization. The accompanying music and flashes of cathedrals, church doors and statues are used to create a mystical background, against which horror stories unfold. Now no one doubts that some priests have failed miserably in their duties and that innocent persons have been cruelly hurt. But sentiments of sorry and anger should not be used to mask the demands of honest reporting.

"Honest reporting would require that when Richard Sipe (an ex-priest) arrives at a figure of 3,000 sexual abusers among 50,000 priests (6 percent) he is actually referring to sexual **tendencies**, not actual behavior (see the book by Philip Jenkins, *Pedophiles and Priests*). Honest reporting would mandate that the figure of clergy sexual abuse in the Catholic priesthood is less than the figure among the non-celibate Protestant clergy (between .2 to 1.7 percent for priests and between 2-3 percent for ministers). Honest reporting would disclose that Father John McNeill, who offers what he 'thinks' the incidence of abuse might be, is actually the co-founder of Dignity, a homosexual group that

openly rejects Catholic teaching and has no standing in the Church.

“No comparative data with other segments of society are presented. Moreover, we hear nothing about false accusations, tarnished careers, greedy lawyers or obsequious therapists. And there is nothing about anti-Catholic bigotry.

“HBO is not the first to float the idea that a ‘code of secrecy’ keeps the Church from revealing the truth about clergy sexual abuse: that honor extends to the Nazis and others.

“The Catholic League will call on all Catholics to boycott HBO and will provide its members with preprinted postcards that can be sent to the company.”

WE'RE “PARANOID”

The *New Republic*, one of Washington's favorite liberal weeklies, doesn't like the Catholic League's Annual Report on Anti-Catholicism. We thought you'd like to know what we had to say in reply, so here is the text of the letter we sent to the editor:

“In your ‘Notebook’ editorial of April 22, you criticize the Catholic League for issuing an annual report on anti-Catholicism. You cite our complaints against recent college productions of the movies *Agnes of God* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*, as well as the 1995 release of *Priest*, as indicative of our ‘paranoia.’

“That would suggest that Michael Medved (who is not

Catholic) is also paranoid for branding *Agnes of God* as anti-Catholic. It would suggest that Blockbuster is paranoid for refusing to stock *The Last Temptation of Christ*. And it would suggest that scores of organizations and critics are also paranoid for labeling *Priest* as anti-Catholic. With regard to the last film, your charge also makes inexplicable the explicit statements of anti-Catholicism that both the writer and the director of *Priest* have made.

“The Catholic League does not complain about every *Sister Act*-type movie that is made. But if the *New Republic* can’t distinguish between that movie and the films we complained about, then that indicates a tolerance for intolerance that the Catholic League is proud to fight against.”

What is perhaps most interesting about the *New Republic*’s response is that it charges that the Catholic League “has taken the lead of the Anti-Defamation league, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance and the NAACP” by issuing its report. This is a curious statement insofar as the *New Republic* has not been known for making critical comments about anything those groups do, much less for releasing a report on bigotry.

HUMOR AND BAD TASTE RECONSIDERED

There has always been humor and bad taste. Unfortunately, we not only have more bad taste than humor these days, we have a blurring of the lines between the two. To be exact, we have become so accustomed to bad taste that much of it frequently passes as humor.

Lots of people don’t like Bill and Hillary. But what Don Imus

did was bad taste—insulting the President and First Lady at a function they attended. The reaction of Don Imus and his supporters was predictable: this is how radio talk show hosts earn their living, ergo, no one has a right to complain. Now if that's true, then doesn't that tell us something about the status of our culture?

The increase in bad taste is a function of our willingness to accept it. Quite simply, we get more of it because we are prepared to tolerate more of it. It's also the case that many people no longer know what's in good taste, the result being that bad taste is allowed to flourish. Consider, for example, *Mad* magazine.

When I was a kid, I loved reading *Mad*. To be sure, it was always a bit irreverent, but even in those days few complained that it was vulgar or insulting. No more. What was once a smart-alecky comic book has now become a trashy rag. Not content to poke fun at the conventional, it has become an organ that assaults the conventional. This signals a change in our culture, and it is not a change for the better.

The May edition of *Mad* has a spread titled, "The Devil's Advocate: The Monthly Newsletter For Satan Worshipers." Introducing this section we read the following inscriptions: "Yak Blood vs. Chicken Urine"; "Our Travel Experts Pick the 50 Best Churches, Temples and Mosques in Europe to Deface!"; "Vomiting on the Cross on Cue: Our Experts Show You How!"; "Surefire Ways to Foil an Exorcist!"

Then there is the spot called, "The Inquiring Photographer." Four people, complete with their photo, are asked to respond to the question, "What was your most embarrassing moment as a devil worshipper?" Dolores Dripping from Phoenix, Arizona expressed herself this way: "I walked past St. Patrick's Cathedral the other day without hocking up a wad of green phlegm and spitting on its doorstep."

We will survive *Mad* magazine, but we may not survive the culture that spawned it. When humor becomes debased, and vitriol acquires respectability, we are giving a green light to incivility. The social consequences of this are many and none is more evident than a coarsening of our culture. Here's another example of what I mean.

When I read in the *New York Times* about a play that was surely anti-Catholic, I knew I had to see it (it comes with the territory of being president of the Catholic League). How did I know it was in bad taste? Because when the *Times* calls a play about Catholics "camp" humor, I know what that means.

I was ready for the Catholic bashing element of the play, but not for the crowd reaction. Oh sure, I didn't expect that those who like this stuff would be aghast at what they saw, but I didn't expect them to laugh at every single line and movement that—no matter how inane—took a cheap shot at Catholic beliefs and practices. The play was so dumb I left at intermission. I guess those who stayed behind just hadn't gotten enough.

Reporters often ask how I know when a play, or a movie, is simply joking about Catholicism, or is attacking it. I don't have a gadget that I pull out of my pocket, but I do have a sense of humor and a discriminating taste. Ideally, humor should be regarded as humor by both the humorist and the target audience. What matters is not how those who attend an event feel about it, rather it is how the target audience would have felt had they had seen it. And that is why *The Tragic and Horrible Life of the Singing Nun* qualifies as bad taste, even though those who saw it got a kick out of it.

When bad taste is seen as humor, it suggests something sinister is happening to the culture. Those who acquiesce are doing a disservice to themselves and to the next generation, and that is why it is necessary to challenge bad taste and root it out. That's not only a good idea, it's necessary for

the preservation of good taste. And good taste allows for real humor, not its obverse.

THE GREAT NATIONAL RESOURCE — RELIGION

by Russell Shaw

Is religion a national asset? George Washington certainly thought so.

“Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports...firmest props of the duties of men and citizens,” Washington famously declared in his presidential farewell address in 1796.

Lately, though, what looked so clear to Washington has not necessarily been clear to everybody else. Court tests and community squabbles over religion’s role in the public square—in fact, over whether it has a role—have been regular features of American life for decades.

In his book “The Culture of Disbelief” published in 1994, Yale law professor Stephen L. Carter worried about “a trend in our political and legal cultures toward treating religious beliefs as arbitrary and unimportant.”

Indeed, Carter added, “more and more, our culture seems to take the positions that believing deeply in the tenets of one’s faith represents...something that thoughtful, public-spirited American citizens would do well to avoid.”

That would be a serious mistake, a new social-science report

contends. For not only are religious belief and practice good for individuals—they are very good for society. The report by Patrick F. Fagan, a policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation, states:

“The evidence indicates strongly that it is good social policy to foster the widespread practice of religion. It is bad social policy to block it.

“The widespread practice of religious beliefs is one of America’s greatest national resources. It strengthens individuals, families, communities and society as a whole. It significantly affects educational and job attainment and reduces the incidence of such major social problems as out-of-wedlock births, drug and alcohol addiction, crime and delinquency.

“No other dimension of the nation’s life, other than the health of the family (which the data show also is tied powerfully to religious practice) should be of more concern to those who guide the future course of the United States.”

Fagan, a deputy undersecretary of the Department of Health and Human Services responsible for family policy in the Bush administration, set out these conclusions in “Why Religion Matters,” a report reviewing social-science studies of the impact of religion on individual behavior and social life in the United States.

Even in the face of assaults from secularizing forces, the report points out, religious belief and practice remain at unusually high levels in this country. More than half of Americans go to church every week. Surveys find that 94 percent of blacks, 91 percent of women, 87 percent of whites and 85 percent of men say they pray regularly. Even among agnostics and atheists—about 13 percent of the total population—some 20 percent report that they pray every day.

And, according to Fagan, the results are highly beneficial.

- Churchgoers are more likely to be married, less likely to be divorced, and more likely to manifest a high degree of marital satisfaction. Church attendance is the most important predictor of marital stability and happiness.
- Regular religious practice also is associated with successful efforts by inner-city youth to escape poverty.
- To a considerable degree, church-going “inoculates” people against personal and social ills such as suicide, drug abuse, out-of-wedlock births and crime. It also helps people overcome problems such as alcoholism, drug addiction and marital breakdown.
- Religious practice also is associated with such mental-health benefits as less depression and higher self-esteem.
- The data even show regular practice of religion to be associated with physical health—increased longevity, improved chances of recovery from illness and reduced incidence of many serious diseases.

One study, published in 1982 by Dr. Robert B. Byrd, a cardiologist at the medical school of the University of California in San Francisco, found measurable benefits in prayer—not just prayer by, but prayer for, patients who underwent cardiac surgery.

“None of the patients knew they were being prayed for, none of the attending doctors and nurses knew who was being prayed for and who was not, and those praying had no personal contact with the patients before or during the experiments,” Fagan’s report stated.

“Outcomes for the two sets of patients differed significantly:

those prayed for had noticeably fewer post-operative congestive heart failures, fewer cardiopulmonary arrests, less pneumonia and less need for antibiotics.”

Up to now, the prayer study apparently is one of a kind in the social-science realm. But there are many other studies showing positive affects of religion on behavioral and social problems, such as illegitimacy, crime, delinquency and other social ills.

Not all religious practice is benign. Fagan’s report calls attention to the social-science distinction between religious practice that is “intrinsic”—“God-oriented and based on beliefs which transcend the person’s own existence”—and “extrinsic” practice, described as “self-oriented and characterized by outward observance.” The former is beneficial, the latter is not.

Assuming religious practice to be of the benign sort, though, Fagan found it to be, for example, “one of the most powerful of all factors in preventing out-of-wedlock births.”

“Nearly without exception, religious practice sharply reduces the incidence of pre-marital intercourse,” he said. But the reverse also is true: “The absence of religious practice accompanies sexual permissiveness and premarital sex.”

Parallel effects also have been found among young inner-city black males. According to one study, church attendance is positively linked to “substantial differences” in their behavior as compared with the behavior of non-attending youth and also to their chances of escaping inner-city poverty.

In light of such findings, Fagan offered a number of suggestions for policy-makers and officials to encourage religious practice in appropriate ways.

- Congress should initiate “a new national debate” on the role of religion in American

life, should ask the General Accounting Office to review the evidence in this matter and present its findings to a new national commission, and should fund federal experiments in school choice, including religiously sponsored schools.

- The president should appoint federal judges who are “more sensitive to the role of religion in public life” and should join Congress in directing the Census Bureau to include religious practice in the 2000 census. Instructing federal agencies to cooperate with church-sponsored social, medical, and educational services is not against separation of church and state.
- The Supreme Court should review its church-state rulings for hostility to religion and should let Congress handle church-state matters that belong with the legislative branch rather than the courts.

Fagan also called on religious leaders to be “much more assertive” in emphasizing the contribution of religion to national health and in resisting efforts to “minimize religion in the public discourse.”

Recognizing the role of religion in solving inner-city poverty and other problems, he said, church people should urge educators, social scientists and social-policy practitioners to “rely more on religious belief and worship to achieve social policy and social-work goals.”

Russell Shaw is a member the Catholic League Board of Directors.

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THE EASTER BUNNY BLUES

by Kathleen McCreary

Does anyone think that the Easter Bunny and his cheerful basket full of colored eggs pose a threat to the hallowed principle of separation of church and state? Apparently so, for last year the Scarsdale, N.Y. Board of Education refused to allow distribution of flyers announcing the annual “Easter Eggstravaganza” in its five grammar schools. Requiring the destruction of 2,500 flyers, the Board ordered the substitution of new ones with the offending “Easter” word excised.

Only re-labeled as the “Spring Extravaganza” could the event be announced. This year, the focus on eggs and bunnies was further sanitized to avoid the association with the blighted “E” word, as Bugs Bunny became a leading character and the event itself was moved to a Saturday, and not on Easter weekend.

The Easter Bunny should not feel any loss of self-esteem, however, because the Scarsdale Board of Education is an equal opportunity discriminator. Santa Claus, Rudolph and Frosty have all suffered the same fate. Two years ago at Christmastime, the Board’s “Holiday Guidelines” banished “garlands, wreaths, evergreens, menorahs and caroling” because they had “become closely associated with religious celebrations.” At the same time, the Board revoked permission to sing secular seasonal songs like “Jingle Bells.” The word “Christmas” was taken off the spelling list at some grammar schools, and at the high school, candy canes were confiscated by a few zealous teachers. Even the color and shape of cookies became an issue: green and red sprinkles as well as bell and star shapes were all suspect.

In place of celebration recognizing Christmas, Hanukkah, or Ramadan, Scarsdale's Board of Education has revived pagan holidays such as Winter Solstice and invented new eco-holidays such as "Bird Day." Problems posed by musical, dramatic and artistic recognition of the December holidays were deftly handled by moving grammar school assemblies to mid-January. In the high school, where students are of course more mature, music from Disney's "The Lion King" fit the holiday bill perfectly. It is Afro-centric, astrologically pagan (with Simba's father appearing in the stars) and ecologically "sensitive." The three "r's" of the Scarsdale Board of Education are Re-name, Re-schedule, and Reduce to Absurdity.

Not surprisingly, the local citizenry protested vigorously such religious and cultural "cleansing" of their schools. Retreating temporarily, the Board rescinded its infamous "Holiday Guidelines," but in form only. Now all holidays are reduced to homogeneous mush. The emotive, "feel good" and social welfare aspects of holidays—the sharing, caring and gift-giving—are encouraged, but the authentic cultural symbols that distinguish holidays of religious origin remain banished as insensitive, pernicious, even seditious. Last December there was no Santa, nor any evergreen, nor any menorah, nor any school-scheduled holiday songfest. "Happy Thanksgiving" appeared on bulletin boards, but not "Merry Christmas," "Happy Hanukkah" nor even "Happy Kwanza."

In an expansive spirit of multicultural political correctness, in one school the Board allowed the depiction of a Native American maiden on ice skates. She emitted the greeting, "Happy Holidays."

We might as well say, "Happy Snoopy," to which Charlie Brown would no doubt reply, "Good Grief!" Let us hope Charlie and Lucy enjoy a rollicking good Easter Egg Hunt.

Kathleen McCreary is a member of the Catholic League Board of Directors

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AN OPEN LETTER TO MAYOR WILLIE BROWN

San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown is caught in a crossfire between Native Americans and Roman Catholics. The city's Art Commission has approved a plaque for public display that blames Catholic missionaries for the deaths of half of California's Indians.

This event stems from the need to relocate an existing monument which depicts an Indian at the feet of a conqueror and missionary. Some Native Americans have denounced the monument and do not want it relocated. Now the Arts Commission wants to replace the monument with a plaque that reads: "With their efforts over in 1834, the missionaries left behind about 56,000 converts—and 150,000 dead. Half the original Native American population had perished during this time from diseases, armed attacks and mistreatment."

William Donohue sent a letter to Mayor Brown protesting the Arts Commission's gambit. The text of the letter is printed below:

"As president of the nation's largest Catholic civil rights organization, I am requesting that you dissuade your city's Arts Commission from erecting a plaque that defames Roman Catholics. If Native Americans feel that the original monument on Hyde and Grove—one that has stood for more than a century—defames their culture, then it is entirely understandable that you would accede to their wish not to have it relocated. But nothing is resolved if by correcting one injustice, the city creates another.

"The prevailing climate of political correctness may argue

for exercising tolerance of Native Americans and intolerance of Roman Catholics. But as the Mayor of San Francisco, you have a commitment to fighting injustice against all segments of your city. That is why I appeal to you to intervene in this matter and prevent any public defamation of Catholics. Surely you must agree that it is preferable to have no monument to one that slanders Catholics.

"Whatever your decision, I will report it in our monthly journal, *Catalyst*. It reaches over 200,000 members nationwide, as well as every Congressman and Bishop in the nation. Thank you for your consideration."

No reply had been received at press time.

DIABLO VALLEY COLLEGE GETS THE MESSAGE

Last November, the Catholic League sent a letter to the president of Diablo Valley College in Pleasant Hill, California complaining about a display called, "H.I.V. and You." The poster, which was placed outside the administration office, showed a stern looking cleric (who happened to resemble a bishop) erasing a chalkboard which said, "I will use condoms"; a young student was depicted watching the cleric.

In the letter to the president of the college, the league said, in part, "It is one thing to question what are the most appropriate anti-AIDS measures, quite another to maliciously caricature a religion's teachings on sexuality. What makes this so disturbing is that in an age when multiculturalism is embraced by the academy, there are still vestiges of

intolerance against some groups.”

The league called for direct action on this matter and is pleased to report that shortly after our letter arrived, the display was withdrawn. Word of this victory just reached us in April.

LEAGUE PROTEST OF THE LAST SUPPER PAYS OFF

The movie, *The Last Supper*, while not offensive to Catholics, nonetheless offended Catholics with its promotional material. The league, responding to many complaints, wrote a letter of protest to Sony Picture Releasing president, Jeffrey Blake.

“Our position,” said Dr. Donohue, “is unambiguous: the use of religious symbols by profit-making institutions should be treated reverentially, or not at all. I would be most interested in knowing your thoughts on this matter.

“In addition, perhaps you can explain to me why the display of a tomato, complete with a crown of thorns and flame emanating from its top, poised above a table of actors toasting wine, should be used to advertise a movie called *The Last Supper*? The New York engagement opening on Good Friday also deserves explanation.”

The response from Sony was decisive: “We have taken the unusual step of modifying our marketing campaign by removing the crown of thorns from the tomato, a depiction that you may have interpreted as offensive.”

The league is satisfied with this modification.

NEW YORK PLAY, SINGING NUN, DEFAMES CATHOLICISM

The Tragic and Horrible Life of the Singing Nun is a play that ridicules the life of the late singing nun, Jeanine Deckers. It was shown in April and May at the Grove Street Playhouse, in New York's West Village. The play is vulgar and defamatory of Catholicism.

Catholic League president William Donohue saw the play and issued the following comment on it to the press:

"The Tragic and Horrible Life of the Singing Nun features Sister Jeanine, the nun who sang the 1960s hit song, 'Dominique.' She is portrayed as a simpleton nun who becomes a lesbian. There is a drag queen nun, Sister Coco Callmeishmael, and a cigarette smoking Mother Superior (who is also a 'pervert fan'), all of whom reside in a convent known as Our Lady of the Pernicious and Pestilent Wounds. A priest appears and has simulated sex on a piano with the Mother Superior.

"The play defames the Church, its saints and sacraments (especially Holy Communion), and priests and nuns. Yet the *New York Times* branded it as merely 'camp' humor. This tells us more about the newspaper than it should prudentially advertise. More honest was the writer and director of the play, Blair Fell, who called it 'mostly fiction and strictly libelous.'

"It is disturbing to witness so many attacks on the Catholic Church coming from the artistic community. Even worse is the response of some critics: no matter how poor the talent, the very fact that a play debases the Catholic Church is good

enough to warrant a positive review. The good news is that even after the *New York Times* flagged the play, only 39 people showed up to watch it.”

REMAKE OF DIABOLIQUE BASHES CATHOLICS

The 1996 version of the original French movie, *Diabolique*, is vintage 1990s fare. In the original film, which was released in 1954, there was no nudity, vulgarity, gore or anti-Catholicism. The latest version has it all.

The movie features a plot by the wife and lover of a diabolical man to kill him. In the original, Simone Signoret played the role of the man’s lover; Sharon Stone has this part in the latest release. Signoret was slightly cynical of the man’s wife’s Catholicism (an ex-nun), but she does not make a single anti-Catholic remark. Stone, however, makes several comments that debase Catholicism, some of which are laden with sexual references. And in the 1996 version, we witness the wife stabbing an assailant in the eye with a cross pendant.

This just goes to show that when Hollywood addresses Catholicism in the 1990s it will go out of its way to offend Catholics. There is no other way to understand the content differences between the original and the remake of *Diabolique*.