

ERIE, PA SCHOOL DISTRICT YIELDS TO LEAGUE PRESSURE

In the last edition of *Catalyst*, we published a letter from William Donohue to the president of the Millcreek Township School District in Erie, Pennsylvania stating the league's objections to a school district ruling that barred students from drawing a nativity scene in the "Holiday" card contest. The league threatened a lawsuit unless immediate action were taken to rectify the situation. Fortunately, corrective measures were taken and the matter has been resolved.

The league was notified by the law firm that represents the school district that the memo to the teachers forbidding the drawing of a nativity scene "was an error which the school district and the board of school directors have admitted at a public meeting."

Following the meeting, a memo was sent by the school district to all teachers advising them of "the mistake and correcting the problem in regard to the future." In addition, the superintendent of schools scheduled a meeting with Bishop Donald Trautman so as to assure him that "Millcreek Township School District is following the United States Constitution in regard to religion in the schools."

The league is satisfied with this action and has notified the law firm of its decision.

The league was prepared to sue and to notify the U.S. Department of Education of the violation. It was President Clinton who sent a memo to Attorney General Janet Reno and Secretary of Education Richard Riley in 1995 instructing them on the religious expression rights of students in public schools. A copy of that memo was sent to the Millcreek School District.

This just goes to show that some educators, like others, will try to get away with implementing their politics if allowed to do so. It also goes to show what the league can accomplish without going to court.

OREGON D.A. LOSES IN COURT

On January 27, a federal appeals court ruled that the District Attorney who authorized the bugging of a confessional last year in Oregon violated the constitutional rights of the priest and penitent involved in the case. The Associated Press story on this issue correctly said that the court decision “represents a victory for the Catholic Church in Oregon and a defeat for the Lane County Prosecutor.”

The ruling also represents a victory for the Catholic League. It was the league that led a national outcry against the surreptitious taping of the confession between Father Tim Mockaitis of Eugene, Oregon and Conan Wayne Hale, a man suspected of a crime. Father Mockaitis, unbeknownst to him, was taped when administering the Sacrament of Reconciliation; it was District Attorney Doug Harclerod who authorized the bugging. The circuit court ruled that both the priest and the penitent had their First and Fourth Amendment rights violated.

The taping took place on April 22, 1996. In early May, a reporter for the Eugene *Register-Guard* discovered in court records that Harclerod had authorized the bugging. The reporter, Bill Bishop, called the Catholic League to alert us to this violation and the league, in turn, led a massive public relations campaign against the D.A. The league got Harclerod to apologize and pledge never to do this again. The league also secured the support of Congressman Peter King who

introduced federal legislation forever barring this practice again.

CAN CATHOLICS BE ANTI-CATHOLIC?

Not too long ago, when we registered a complaint with someone for making an anti-Catholic remark, he defended himself by saying that he had run the remark in question by some of his Catholic friends and they weren't offended. Swell, we told him, but that didn't matter—what mattered is that we were offended. Nonetheless, he was on to something: how can we explain the differing responses?

When faced with such a question, it seems plain that there are two possible answers: either we overreacted or this guy's Catholic friends under-reacted. People overreact when they're too thin skinned, when every little crack about something that's held dear is seen as a major offense. But that's not the way the Catholic League positions itself. On the contrary, we let a lot of things go that others might not. So we are left with explaining why some Catholics fail to react when their religion comes under attack.

Some Catholics have become so immune to Catholic-bashing that they have come to accept it as normal. This is dangerous because it suggests that these Catholics are unprepared to defend their religion, and this unwittingly gives succor to our adversaries. There are other Catholics who know that the Church is under attack but still don't want to do anything about it. Essentially, they're afraid. Afraid of drawing too much attention to the problem, afraid of being accused of

being hypersensitive, and so on. They also contribute to the problem through their inaction. But worse still are those Catholics who actually delight in seeing their Church get bashed.

Is it possible for Catholics to be anti-Catholic? Definitely. Jews have a term to describe those Jews who are anti-Jewish—they're called "self-hating" Jews (Karl Marx comes quickly to mind and so, too, does the late radical lawyer, William Kunstler). Well, folks, there are "self-hating" Catholics, too. And on that count, I can think of quite a few who would qualify.

"Self-hating" Catholics come in two basic varieties. Some are practicing Catholics who have come to hate much of what Catholicism stands for, and others have long since given up practicing their faith; the latter group goes by the self-designated label, "lapsed" Catholic, or "recovering" Catholic.

An example of the former type would include those who might object to seeing most of the sacraments mocked in a particularly vicious fashion, but would not object to seeing certain teachings being trashed. Usually, these teachings concern matters of sexuality: contraception, abortion, celibacy, women priests, etc. Therefore, when a play like *Late Nite Catechism* is performed (a play that ridicules pre-Vatican II teachings, customs and traditions), it is music to the ear of these disaffected Catholics.

"Lapsed" or "recovering" Catholics are really not Catholics at all, and that is why they should be regarded as former Catholics. There is no such phenomenon among Jews because to be a Jew is a function of ethnicity (as well as religion) and, as such, is not affected by a non-believing status. Hence, there can be no "lapsed" or "recovering" Jews, just "self-hating" ones.

In any event, here's an example of an anti-Catholic Catholic.

In the pages of the *National Catholic Reporter* (NCR) there recently appeared a letter by a woman who took issue with the title of an article called, "Time to rework politics of Catholic leaders." Her complaint was that the piece should have been entitled, "Time to wrestle leadership from the Ku Klux Cardinals." She explained her hatred by attacking the Church's teachings on sexuality, or what she labeled as the "Vatican-via-the-clergy means of control, their [the Cardinals'] right to invade our most personal and intimate lives."

Now if a non-Catholic were to identify Cardinals with the Klan, he would promptly be labeled a bigot. So should this woman (the fact that an editor at NCR selected this letter for print raises another set of questions). Moreover, from reading the letter, we know that what was said was not said in jest; it was said in a serious way and it was meant to wound. Inclusion in a group does not offer immunity from making bigoted remarks against that group, and that is why it is entirely possible for Catholics to be branded anti-Catholic. To cite one example, it is well-known that Phil Donahue and Bryant Gumbel went to Catholic schools, but it is also known that both of these men had a field-day slamming Catholicism while hosting their shows on TV. The mind boggles at the thought that somehow they should be given a free pass to bash our religion simply because their roots are Catholic. After all, what's the difference between them and a Jimmy Swaggart?

In the end, tolerance for Catholic-bashing is a function of how deeply committed Catholics are to Catholicism as it exists, and not as it might exist under the reign of some reformist pope. "Lapsed" and "recovering" Catholics may not agree, but then again who really cares what they think?

“WE ARE NOT AMUSED”

BBC Sitcom Series Satirizes Catholic Priests...by Kenneth D. Whitehead

In December, William Donohue was contacted by the British Broadcast Corporation (BBC) to preview the TV show, “Father Ted.” Popular in Britain, this comedy program has recently attracted the interest of several American broadcasters. However, the BBC was somewhat concerned whether the show had “cultural transferability,” meaning that it wanted to know if Americans would find it humorous to poke some fun at Irish Catholic priests (they like that sort of thing over there). That’s why Donohue was asked to preview the show in Washington.

Other commitments kept Donohue from attending the preview, so in his place was Kenneth Whitehead, noted Catholic author and a member of the league’s board of directors. What Whitehead witnessed was disturbing. His comments are printed below.

Just when you thought popular television had reached bottom in the casual disrespect and downright vulgarity it regularly displays in its treatment of religious people and religious beliefs, especially Catholic ones, along comes the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to show that it is possible to descend to an even lower level—yet some audiences apparently go right on eating it all up.

One of the most popular current situation comedies broadcast by the BBC in the British Isles is not only relentlessly and deliberately vulgar in its—mostly slapstick—situations and effects. It achieves most of these effects precisely by depicting Catholic priests in Ireland as considerably less than admirable characters generally; and also by regularly making light of supposed Catholic beliefs and practices (the show is nevertheless so popular in Ireland that the Irish state-owned television network has purchased the rights to rebroadcast it).

This BBC television series is entitled *Father Ted*, and is based on the imagined lives and adventures of three priests living on an island off the west coast of Ireland. The humor of the series, such as it is, relies heavily on typical British-style "put downs" of various types of people: alcoholics, people in wheelchairs, members of the servant class, people who are not very bright, Irish people in general (who are mostly seen to fit into the previous category), and, especially, Catholic priests.

The three main characters in the show are three wacky Irish priests who live together in a rectory with a dotty housekeeper who is always trying to serve tea at the most inconvenient moments. Most of the humor and the humorous situations are based on the incongruity of Catholic priests ever doing or saying what these three Catholic priests are depicted as regularly doing and saying. The language alone typically used by them is quite vulgar and sometimes truly shocking. The situations depicted are usually quite remote from any possible priestly work or activity. No doubt all of this is quite intentional on the part of the writers, actors, producers, and sponsors; being a priest is itself considered by them humorous and worthy of a put-down, apparently.

The star of the show is a Father Ted Crilly, a flashy, opportunistic type of fellow with apparently unfulfilled yearnings and blow-dried hair. In one of the episodes of the series which I viewed, Father Ted was principally engaged in competing-impersonating Elvis no less!—in a priests' masquerade contest (in which a competing group of Irish priests arrive as female impersonators clad in low-cut ball gowns). If you can imagine any priests who would ever be involved in such dubious doings, then you probably have roughly the same idea of the Catholic Church that the scriptwriters of this show do.

Another one of the episodes I saw begins with Father Ted in a bookstore at a book-signing session attempting to get the

signature of the lady author of a volume entitled Bejewelled with Kisses. The lady author in question turns out to be both attractive and, conveniently, recently divorced; just as conveniently, she happens to be on her way to spending some time on the very island where the three priests live. Father Ted is later shown clumsily attempting to pursue her in scenes not completely saved from suggestiveness by the farce into which they quickly descend.

This latter episode is apparently one of the rare episodes in the series in which any reference at all is made to Father Ted's work as a priest; in order to keep an appointment with his visiting lady friend, Father Ted has to rush through an obligatory Mass celebrated for some nuns so fast that the vast television audience will not fail to grasp why the sworn enemies of the Church once branded the Mass as "mumbo-jumbo." Father Ted makes some of today's liturgical innovators look positively reverent by comparison.

The second of the three priests depicted on the show, Father Dougal, is quite deliberately presented as an uncomprehending simpleton, a cheerful idiot. Father Dougal is the foil for Father Ted; he can always be depended on to say the wrong thing and, on one occasion, he turns out not even to know who the pope is. Such a person could never have gotten into, much less out of, any seminary anywhere.

The third of the island-dwelling priests, Father Jack, is presented as an out-and-out alcoholic; he is consistently shown, in the episodes I viewed, either in an alcoholic stupor or single-mindedly attempting to acquire yet another bottle. In one episode he passes out after having drunk Toilet Duck cleaner.

One of the "visiting priests" in one of the episodes I viewed is shown as quite unable to control his compulsive laughter about virtually everything. In short, in the world of this sitcom, Catholic priests are a very strange breed indeed; they

are regularly shown as figures of fun, appropriately having pratfalls or otherwise in questionable, embarrassing, or compromising situations: rarely is the fun good, clean fun.

The two Irish scriptwriters who first conceived this show and continue to write the scripts for it are supposed to be ex-Catholics—"out of practice," they say. It shows. They don't even get the externals right (i.e., vestments, giving blessings, etc.). The point of having priests as the main characters in the show in the first place continues to be almost solely the incongruity of what they are then shown doing and saying. The show's scriptwriters evidently belong to today's generation of Catholics deprived of any proper catechesis; this has been the situation apparently also in Ireland. At one point Father Ted is actually made to remark: "That's the great thing about Catholicism. It's so vague nobody knows what it's all about."

On behalf of the Catholic League, I took sharp issue with the very nature of the show as such. I found it fundamentally objectionable to attempt to base humor upon such sad and unreal caricatures of Catholic priests. The show's approach and treatment of Catholic beliefs and Catholic people fundamentally belittles and mocks both—and there is otherwise no redeeming social value whatsoever. I said that I could guarantee that the Catholic League would vigorously oppose the airing of this BBC sitcom on any American network.

I added that it was a British monarch who probably said it best: "We are not amused," Queen Victoria was accustomed to say apropos of lapses of taste and morality considerably less serious than those regularly featured in this tasteless BBC series about three Irish priests out on an island off the west coast of Ireland.

Kenneth D. Whitehead writes regularly for such magazines as The Catholic World Report, Crisis, Fidelity, and New Oxford Review. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the Catholic League.

GORE MAKES VEILED ATTACK ON CATHOLIC CHURCH

On January 22, the 24th anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, Vice President Al Gore spoke before the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL) delivering a decidedly pro-choice speech. Labeling the pro-life side “anti-choice,” Gore insinuated that the Catholic Church was responsible for the large volume of abortions in the U.S..

Gore claimed that those who believe that “family planning in the form of birth control is morally wrong” were culpable for driving up the abortion rate. Referring to this group, Gore said, “If they were willing to abandon that aspect of their common front, then there would be much that we could all do together to make abortions rare.” He left little doubt that it was those Catholics who followed the teachings of the Church on family planning that were responsible for the high abortion rate.

As a result of Gore’s attack, the Catholic League sent the following statement to the media:

“Vice President Gore should have the integrity to simply finger the Catholic Church as the reason why abortions are not rare. Instead, he prefers to assign culpability in an oblique manner. This is regrettable because it precludes a much needed national debate: is it the teachings of the Catholic Church that accounts for the high abortion rate or is it the edicts of the Clinton Administration? Given the fact that Gore, like President Clinton, supports partial-birth abortions, it is difficult to understand what abortions he might oppose.

“There is another problem with Gore’s speech. Both he and Hillary Clinton addressed an organization that was founded on anti-Catholicism. In its early days, NARAL, as one of its founders Dr. Bernard Nathanson has said, ‘attacked [the Roman Catholic Church] at every opportunity. Our favorite tack was to blame the church for the death of every woman from a botched abortion.’ As such, it is outrageous that the Vice President and the First Lady would dignify such an audience with their presence.”

LEAGUE PROTESTS ACTIVIST COURT

On January 27, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott received a letter from the Judicial Selection Monitoring Project of the Free Congress Foundation protesting the appointment of activist judges. The Catholic League signed the letter, along with hundreds of other national organizations. It was an activist court that gave us *Roe v. Wade* and other decisions which enjoy no constitutional grounding.

CONSERVATIVE SCHOLAR SLAMS CATHOLICS

Irwin Stelzer, director of regulatory policy studies at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, contributed an essay to a symposium in the publication *Commentary* wherein he

took some cheap shots at Catholics.

Published in the February edition of the magazine, Stelzer, along with 14 other writers, was asked to comment on a previously published symposium in *First Things*, the interdenominational monthly edited by Father Richard John Neuhaus. Unlike the other contributors, Stelzer found it necessary to buttress his argument by making anti-Catholic remarks.

Stelzer's statement that Jewish neoconservatives should have known better than to "pitch an intellectual tent broad enough" to include "many Catholics brought up in a tradition that does not welcome dissent from its revealed truths" smacked of an animus against Catholics. Stelzer was right, of course, to suggest that certain teachings of the Catholic Church are not dependent on a referendum for validation, but he was wrong to phrase his words in a manner that was downright disparaging of Catholicism.

In a letter to *Commentary*, William Donohue also stated that on many occasions he has joined with "Jewish men and women in fighting anti-Semitism," concluding that it is "only just that reciprocal support be given by Jews when anti-Catholicism rears its ugly head."

Even worse was Stelzer's comment that Jewish intellectuals "should not expect to be partners in a governing theocracy" with Catholics. Stelzer never identified whom he was speaking about; there is little doubt he could not name even one Catholic who has proposed a governing theocracy. In his letter, Donohue protested Stelzer's essay as "pure, unadulterated bigotry." He noted that when Catholics like Pat Buchanan and Joe Sobran have offended Jews, *Commentary*, which is published by the American Jewish Committee, has not hesitated to strongly criticize them. Donohue said "The wonder is why *Commentary* found it acceptable to publish Stelzer's bigoted essay in the first place."

RADIO HOST WON'T LET GO

Lynn Cullen, a radio talk show host in Pittsburgh, seemingly won't let go of a story about the length of skirts worn by Catholic schoolgirls. Cullen, who airs on WTAE, spent two hours on January 31 and another three hours on February 3, discussing the subject. Naturally, she had to fill her time with other issues affecting Catholicism.

In a statement to the management of WTAE radio, the league said it was mostly concerned with using the issue of the length of the skirts "as a pretext for an extended diatribe against Catholic institutions." The league maintained that in doing so, Cullen "was setting herself up for trouble." We added that "After all, anyone who spends 5 hours on an issue like this obviously has an agenda to feed."

The league has asked WTAE to explain Cullen's obsession.

LEAGUE FINDS NO HUMOR IN "THAT'S FUNNY" CALENDAR

The Cader Company's 1997 "That's Funny" calendar includes a statement that is anything but funny to Catholics. To be specific, the listing for March 31, Easter Monday, is offensive. It reads, "The Vatican came down with a new ruling: No surrogate mothers. It's a good thing they didn't make this rule before Jesus was born."

This contribution, authored by someone called Elayne Boosler, is disparaging and deserves a response. In a letter to the president of the company, Michael Cader, we asked him to explain why his company listed this entry. We also said that while it was "late to revise the 1997 calendar, it is hoped that next year's calendar will not take liberties with beliefs held sacred by Catholics."

Members can write to Mr. Cader at: **The Cader Company, 38 E. 29th St., 8th floor, New York, New York 10016.**

Many thanks to Father Andrew Carrozza of Mahopac, New York for bringing this to our attention.

PREP SCHOOL REVISES PROGRAM AFTER PROTEST

The Packer Collegiate Institute, a prep school in Brooklyn, revised its "Holiday" program after a protest by the Catholic League.

In December, the school held a holiday celebration that recognized Hanukkah and Kwanzaa, but not Christmas. Students in the middle-school grades sang songs celebrating the Jewish and African-American holidays, but when it came to Christmas, they sang a song with altered lyrics, lyrics that deleted any reference to Christmas. Students were then encouraged to wish each other "Happy End of the Year," an obvious way of avoiding the dreaded salutation, "Merry Christmas."

After a league member contacted the national office, the league sent a letter protesting this action. A phone call from the Packer Collegiate Institute was very encouraging: steps

had already been taken to assure that the program for older students gave due recognition of Christmas, and assurances were given that corrective measures had already been instituted so that what happened in 1996 would not happen again in 1997