

ABC'S "THAT'S LIFE" – THE MOST BIGOTED SHOW OF ALL

The phones at the Catholic League rang off the hook in response to the April 7 episode of the ABC show, "That's Life." Here is how league president William Donohue described the show to the press:

"No show that I have ever seen was as viciously anti-Catholic as last night's episode of 'That's Life.' It was relentless in its bigotry, mocking Christ's crucifixion, the Host, transubstantiation, Holy Water, Catholic prayers, Midnight Mass, salvation, Catholic rituals, the Vatican, the New Testament, the Stations of the Cross, Confession, nuns, priests and, of course, those stupid laypersons who swallow all this moonshine. Reference was made in the show to Easter, offering further evidence that malice was at work; as the producers know, this is Holy Week."

The league was so outraged over this show that it made 1200 copies of the program, sending a tape to the major media outlets and to every bishop and congressman in the nation. The early response was encouraging: dozens of persons had seen the show and, with one lone exception, everyone agreed it was positively shameful. Cardinal O'Connor, without mentioning the show by name, labeled it "insulting" during a talk on Good Friday at St. Patrick's Cathedral.

On April 16, the night of the league's 25th Anniversary Dinner at The Plaza, Donohue held a press conference setting out the league's objections to the show and to ABC, in general. He mentioned how a pattern had emerged at the network. Specific reference was made to an episode of "The Practice," an edition of "Night Line," Christopher Hitchens' attack on Mother Teresa at her funeral, a movie called "Devil's Child," and the propaganda program, "Nothing Sacred."

The *New York Times* ran a story on the press conference quoting Donohue as saying of ABC, "They wouldn't do it to Jews; they wouldn't do it to African-Americans; they wouldn't do it to gays. But somehow they think they can have open season on Catholics." Donohue was also quoted as saying, "There may be some people at ABC who are not happy with the Catholic League after we created war with them over the show, 'Nothing Sacred.'" He added, "Was this their last goodbye? I don't know."

The league expects that those who review a tape of the show will let ABC know how they feel.

MUHLENBERG DIGS A HOLE

Last month in *Catalyst*, we reported on an icon of Mary that was placed in the chapel at Muhlenberg College, accompanied by a statement about Christian reluctance to accept Mary's Jewishness and an attack on Pope Pius XII. William Donohue wrote a letter to Muhlenberg's president, Dr. Arthur Taylor, expressing his concerns. The reply he got was more startling than the subject of his criticism.

In Dr. Taylor's letter to Donohue, he said that for "the Catholic League to try to force your point of view on us violates our freedoms and *brings the Catholic Church to a position which it held centuries ago.*" (Our emphasis.) He closed by saying, "We will not respond to any further communications in this matter."

Donohue responded with a news release saying that "I am absolutely astounded that any college president would actually make such a bigoted remark. Had this happened on a radio or TV show, it would have been equally inexcusable, but at least it

might have been understandable as a slip of the lip. But to commit oneself in writing to such an anti-Catholic comment is mind-boggling.” The league made sure to contact the local media in Allentown, Pennsylvania, the home of Muhlenberg.

League members who would like to write to Dr. Taylor can do so at the following address: Muhlenberg College, 2400 Chew Street, Allentown, PA 18104. Muhlenberg is affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

THE LIMITS OF ECUMENISM

William A. Donohue

After President Clinton took Communion at a South African Roman Catholic church, a well-known journalist, himself not a Catholic, defended the president by saying that what he did was an example of ecumenism. He further held that the Catholic Church should be more inclusive, maintaining that it made good sense to welcome people from other religions to receive the Eucharist at Mass. Unfortunately, this kind of thinking—confusing ecumenism for inclusiveness—is commonplace.

To be ecumenical is to promote greater understanding and cooperation between one religion and another; it is not to collapse the teachings of one religion to fit harmoniously with the strictures of another. True ecumenism respects differences and does not seek to dump all beliefs and teachings into a high speed theological blender. If that were done, the result would be mush.

Respecting differences, especially religious differences, isn't very difficult for those who are on sure footing with their own. The obverse is also true: it is much harder to

respect the tenets of another religion when standing on slippery grounds. The natural corrective is not to soften the grounds of others but to strengthen one's own.

Those who clamor for greater inclusion run up against some pretty elementary sociological laws. All groups, beginning with the family, are based on exclusion. That's what makes every family so special: parents, children and other blood relatives hold a non-transferable status that constitutes their special relationship. People do not decide to check into a family the way they do a hotel, nor are they empowered to invite their friends to join.

With religion, it's admittedly somewhat different. All religions are based on a set of beliefs about the supernatural, beliefs that are subject to change. It is entirely possible to change those beliefs, but it is not possible to make them so inclusive that they embrace everything and anything. If that were to happen, the tent of inclusiveness would collapse of its own weight.

To put it another way, attempts to maximize inclusiveness are bought at the expense of real community. True, meaningful communities are always micro in nature, never macro. That is why it is positively fatuous to believe that there is such a thing as a global community: if it's global in size, it can't be a community (except in the mind of a professor, of course, where all things are possible).

There is also something dishonest about contemporary appeals to inclusiveness. For example, we often hear that the Boy Scouts should be more inclusive, that they should include girls, the godless and gays. Now if this were to happen, it would mean the end of the Boy Scouts, and this explains why those who hate the Scouts continue to advance their claims.

Meanwhile, no one would demand that gay clubs on campus include heterosexuals or that black dorms allow whites to

join. Indeed, even radical feminists don't complain that the Olympics are inherently sexist—though they are, according to their terms—because to do so would be to call for one, open and all-inclusive event; if that were to happen, the results would be obvious.

Teenagers looking for trouble like to “crash” parties. Similarly, ideologues looking for trouble like to crash communities; they do so by invoking the politics of inclusiveness. Instead of respecting diversity, they seek to crush it, and they do so by crashing the walls of those communities they wish to change. This is intolerance, pure and simple.

In the end, there is nothing ecumenical about partaking in the sacraments of another religion, rather it is opportunistic and exploitative. Ed Koch, the former mayor of New York, has attended countless Masses, yet it would never occur to him to receive Communion. Koch, who is Jewish, has too much respect for Catholicism to do such a thing.

Religions that reflexively stretch their contours to include outsiders risk losing their insiders. To be Catholic is to have an identity, just as to be Jewish is to have an identity. That Catholics cannot be bar mitzvahed is only just. Let the princes of inclusiveness call it discrimination, or scream “victim.” Any religion that doesn't protect its borders risks losing its center.

Ecumenism, like anything other value, is capable of being corrupted. At its best, it is a call for mutual respect and understanding. At its worst, it is a call for surrender. What matters is whether we want pudding or jello. Make mine pudding, and I'll take it to go. With my friends, of course.

CLINTON AND COMMUNION

As everyone knows, President Clinton received Holy Communion from a South African Roman Catholic Church on March 29. Unfortunately, initial news reports were misleading and a true account barely surfaced. But perhaps the real story in all this was how the White House handled the matter once it broke.

Most news reports said that Clinton took Communion because he was invited to do so by a priest who acted on behalf of instructions from the South African bishops. This is twice wrong: a) it was the Clinton staff that approached the priest, requesting that the president be allowed to receive Communion, and b) the bishops gave no such authorization.

On April 5, the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference issued a press release explaining what happened. The statement said that "the staff of the U.S. President asked, prior to the Mass, whether the President and Mrs. Clinton could receive Holy Communion, if they wished to do so." The priest mistakenly agreed. There has been no word from the White House why this president, who graduated from Georgetown University, would want his staff to make such a request.

"The local Bishop had not been asked, as required by church practice," the release said, "whether in his opinion it would have been appropriate under the circumstances, to administer Holy Communion to the presidential couple." The final comment said that "It is doubtful that the priest applied his mind to the conditions that needed to be fulfilled as stated in the 1993 norms published by the Holy See and repeated by the SACBC Ecumenical Directory."

A Vatican spokesman, Bishop Geraldo M. Agnelo, said of President Clinton, "Since this person is not a Catholic, he cannot be admitted to Eucharistic Communion." At a press conference, Cardinal Bevilacqua commented that "The Eucharist

is a sign of membership in the church," noting that the circumstances under which a non-Catholic can receive Communion "are extremely rare." Cardinal O'Connor told Catholics at St. Patrick's that "Holy Communion is not to be given or received as an act of courtesy," stating that he wanted to counter the mistaken belief that "if one has enough prestige or money anything goes."

When news of Cardinal O'Connor's remark hit the White House, press secretary Mike McCurry weighed in with a sermon to the New York Archbishop. "Cardinal O'Connor may not be familiar with the doctrinal attitude toward the Holy Eucharist that the conference of bishops in South Africa bring to that question," said the Methodist. Joe Zwillling, the spokesman for the archdiocese, wrote McCurry a letter informing him of Cardinal O'Connor's qualifications.

The pundits had a field day with this issue. Cokie Roberts, who is Catholic (her mom is the U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican), and her husband, Steve, who is Jewish, showed no more shame than McCurry when they wrote that "Cardinal O'Connor seems to be ignoring the most basic of Catholic doctrines that a sacrament is a source of grace." [Note: It was Steve Roberts who made the silly comment about inclusiveness that is the subject of this month's "President's Desk."]

Janet Reno's brother, Robert, who writes for *Newsday*, outdid everyone by suggesting that what Cardinal O'Connor did was to provoke a religious war. William Donohue shot back saying that "it is Reno who wants to light fires, and he does so with characteristic cowardice." Donohue also noted that Reno's diatribe appeared in the Business section of the newspaper.

By the way, when Bill and Hillary took Communion, Jesse Jackson stayed seated.

POSTSCRIPT: “NOTHING SACRED”

The death of “Nothing Sacred” has left most Americans unfazed, but it has sent more than a few of its diehard fans into a tailspin. The post-mortem convulsions prove that the Catholic League was right all along: this was never just another TV show, it was a political statement disguised as entertainment.

True to form, those who worship at Father Ray’s altar find it impossible to admit that their side is the losing side. No amount of evidence will ever convince them that there is no audience for a highly politicized drama about a dissident priest in a dysfunctional parish. That is why they blame everyone but themselves for the collapse of “Nothing.”

Allan Johnson of the *Chicago Tribune* faults ABC for bouncing the show around “like a Ping-Pong ball.” The truth is that “Nothing’s” schedule was juggled so much because that is what its writers, producers and fans demanded: yet every time they moved it, it’s ratings got worse. Now just whose fault was that? Had they not moved the show, cries of unfair competition would have been heard, e.g., no show can compete with NBC’s “Friends.”

When all is said and done, the reason why “Nothing” failed is because it managed to be both offensive and boring at the same time, something no other show has been able to match. Interestingly, reviewers like Johnson can confess to the show’s offensive agenda and still not label it as such. Speaking of the Catholic League, Johnson says that “The New York-based group felt the series gave Catholicism a black eye in that Father Ray questions his belief in God and doesn’t have a problem championing causes that conflict with the teachings of the Catholic Church.” The real wonder is why

anyone, especially Catholics, wouldn't side with the league's reaction.

From the *Journal Star* in Peoria, Illinois, we read that Michael Miller says "No way" to the idea that "Nothing" should be cancelled. "This is a quality show, for starters. It's well-written, well-directed and well-acted. The pacing is just right for a show dealing with spiritual matters." Then why was it a bomb?

Miller whines that the show "has had to face a boycott effort that was more of a smear campaign led by the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights." He never says why other boycotts aren't branded "smear campaigns," just those led by the Catholic League. Miller adds that "Mainly, it has been the league's crusading leader, William Donohue, who has spoken out against the show in one press release after another." Question: did Donohue sign his name to a petition against Disney/ABC over 1 million times or did over 1 million persons sign their names?

It is also revealing that the show wasn't allowed to die a natural death. Not only was it kept on long after it's ratings dictated that it be junked, TV reviewers insisted that "Nothing" fans write to ABC and demand that it return. In addition to Johnson and Miller, Diane Werts of *Newsday* and John Levesque of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* urged readers to write to ABC, supplying names and addresses.

TV Guide took "Nothing's" demise particularly hard. Not only had it conspicuously flagged the show virtually every week that it was on, it ran two obituaries on "Nothing." The March 28-April 3 edition noted that some shows that start slow eventually pick up, sadly commenting that this didn't apply to "Nothing." In the April 4-April 10 edition, *TV Guide* offered a picture of Father Ray, complete with a review of an episode that no one will see, namely it's Easter show. This must be a first—a major media publication prints a review of a show that

will never see the light of day.

Though critics of the Catholic League don't want to admit it, one of the reasons why "Nothing" failed is due to the pressure that we put on corporate sponsors of the show. The 37 following companies all withdrew advertising on the show once the public let its voice known:

Isuzu, Weight Watchers, K-Mart, Benckiser, DuPont, Red Lobster, Ocean Spray, Sears, Glaxo Wellcome, Ponderosa, Dunkin' Donuts, Scott's Liquid Gold, Chrysler-Plymouth, Honda, Arm & Hammer, Home Depot, Borden, Alberto Culver, Montgomery Ward, Ovaltine, Dairy Queen, Mutual of Omaha, Telecom*USA, Cigna, McCormick, Pier 1, NordicTrack, John Paul Mitchell Systems, Meineke, Fantom Technologies Direct, A&M Products, Nissan, RadioShack, Chattem, International Home Foods, Levitz and Van De Kamp.

There were a lot more than 37 companies that advertised on the show and then withdrew their ad, but many didn't want to be identified as joining the walkout, opting instead for a quiet exit. No matter, the point was not lost on the advertising community and that is why "Nothing" was forced to rely heavily on ABC promos for upcoming shows, as well as 800-number ads for John Denver CD's. Our personal favorite was the ABC "color check" ad.

As if we needed more proof, we taped "Nothing's" time slot on ABC the week after it was axed. What we found was the return of conventional advertising, including many companies that had withdrawn their ads from "Nothing." The ratings for the shows that replaced "Nothing" (mostly movie reruns) all went up, making our case even stronger.

Sadly, a group that calls itself Media Images and Religious Awareness held a press conference after "Nothing" was buried. Composed of nuns and lay women, they offered a "Meditation of Thanksgiving for 'Nothing Sacred.'" But their prayer

service/breakfast then turned ugly when they started bashing the Catholic League ("right-wing fanatics," etc.) To which, William Donohue replied in the *New York Times*: "This is adolescent angst. The people who like the show are the Clinton generation who are stuck in the 60's, still living in the past. They're the true reactionaries of our time."

"Nothing" has been nominated for a Peabody award. John Carmody of the *Washington Post* wrote a small piece about this, stating that the show "has had a stormy life as a much-boycotted series about an unusual Catholic priest..." More unusual, we might add, were its fans. By the way, the cable station, Odyssey, which is strangely known for its religious fare, says it's interested in acquiring "Nothing." Now wasn't it P.T. Barnum who said that a sucker is born every minute?

GONE TO THE DOGS

Just when we think we've head it all, we find out that we're wrong. Try this one on for size: did you know that the reason why Puerto Rico has too many dogs is because the island is predominantly Catholic? That's right. According to Teresa Warrick of the Greenhill Humane Society, Puerto Rico is overpopulated with dogs because the most of the people who live there are Catholic and they don't believe in spaying or neutering their pets. Though there was apparently no comment from Frances Kissling on this matter, we do expect to hear from her soon.

The Catholic League finds this hard to believe. We believe that the real reason why there are so many dogs in Puerto Rico is because their diet allows them to live longer: they don't eat meat on Fridays.

SANGER'S "GREATNESS"?

From the perspective of the Catholic League, there was nothing great about the eugenicist founder of Planned Parenthood, Margaret Sanger. Her understanding of population control, emblematic of the people-are-the-problem mentality, was complete with racist ideas. Yet none of this stopped her from being incorporated in a CNN program, "Perspectives," that honored Women's History Month. Still worse was the fact that the portion of the tape that was run included remarks that were disparaging of priests.

In a 1957 interview with Mike Wallace, Sanger dismissed the Church's embrace of natural law as "unnatural," claiming that "nothing bears it out." She couldn't resist adding, "How do they [priests] know? I mean, after all, they're celibates. They don't know love, they know nothing about bringing up children, or any of the marriage problems of life. And yet they speak to people as if they were God."

But it is not priests who act like they're God by advising world bodies on the question of who should be born. That godly power goes to homophobians like Sanger. In any event, the decision to resurrect this clip from Sanger's video anthology suggests a need on the part of the producers of the show to make a statement about Catholicism. The show, incidentally, opened with a glowing commentary from Hillary Clinton.

MARYLAND SCHOOL WINS

Last month, we reported that a Maryland Catholic high school, St. John's Literary Institution, was ordered by a Frederick County Circuit Judge to reinstate two expelled students until a trial was set. When the case went before a U.S. District judge, the right of the school to expel the students was upheld (they were engaged in heavy petting, fondling and kissing in the hallway). Not only that, but the judge ruled against a request on the part of the students that the case be remanded back to Frederick County.

CATHOLIC BELIEFS

"JESUS is the only Answer" is the way the ad begins. Here's a sample of what follows: "Are Catholics Allowed to Believe the Truth regarding the Eternal Virginity of Mary; Prayer and Baptism?" We can only guess.

The ad appeared in the section that advertises religious services in the *Baton Rouge Advocate*, the second largest newspaper in Louisiana. It was published by Minister Clinton W. Palmer of the Christian Church of Baton Rouge. Somehow it strikes us that we've heard this all before.

SINEAD DEFILES VIRGIN MARY

The Catholic League reacted with revulsion to Sinead O'Connor's foul-mouthed portrayal of the Virgin Mary in Neil Jordan's movie, "The Butcher Boy." In one of a series of appearances to the film's main character, a young boy named Francie, Sinead's Mary gratuitously throws in the F-word while counseling him about the loss of his best friend.

Rick Hinshaw viewed the movie and commented that "There is absolutely no context in which it would be appropriate to depict the Mother of Christ uttering such an obscenity." He compared the movie to the "Jerry Springer syndrome, in which any vulgarity, obscenity, or offensive remark is seen not only acceptable, but desirable—a cheap substitute for real creative talent."

The reviewers, of course, loved the film. As for Neil Jordan, he commented that his portrayal of Our Blessed Mother is "the way the Virgin Mary has existed throughout the ages, ever since she was invented." Both he and Sinead O'Connor know something about inventions—they've made their living by inventing ways to offend Catholics.