

# HOAX MOVIE, SLEEPERS, DEFAMES CATHOLIC SCHOOL AND PRIEST

The movie *Sleepers*, based on the book by Lorenzo Carcaterra, opened on October 18 to a protest by the Catholic League. The Propaganda Films movie (a Warner Brothers company) purports to be a true story about a New York Catholic school, Sacred Heart. However, virtually every independent person who has investigated the story has determined that the book and the movie are fictitious. The movie stars Robert De Niro, Dustin Hoffman, Kevin Bacon and Brad Pitt.

The Catholic League is incensed because the movie defames a Catholic school and a Catholic priest. *Sleepers* alleges that four youths from Sacred Heart, an elementary school in New York's Hell's Kitchen, were sent to a reformatory school in the 1960s after a street prank injured an old man. It was in an upstate New York reform school that the boys were sexually assaulted by guards.

In the 1980s, two of the boys, now hit men, kill one of the guards in an act of revenge. One of the other two boys is an Assistant District Attorney who arranges to take the case so he can sabotage it, and the other is author Carcaterra who works at the *New York Daily News*. Carcaterra supposedly gets a priest from Sacred Heart to perjure himself before a jury by claiming that the two killers were with him at a basketball game the night of the murder.

The problem with this is that none of it is true. Attorneys William Callahan and Thomas Harvey have thoroughly investigated this matter and have found it baseless. Father Kevin J. Nelan, the pastor of Sacred Heart, and Father John P. Duffell, who worked at Sacred Heart at the time of the alleged crime, have both said it isn't true.

The truth is that the crime never happened, Carcaterra and the others were never sent to a reform school, and no priest ever perjured himself. School records show that Carcaterra missed no more than 20 days of school in all his years at Sacred Heart, making preposterous the claim that he spent time in reform school. It is also interesting that in Carcaterra's earlier book about his life, *A Safe Place*, he never mentions this alleged "true story."

Moreover, the Manhattan DA's office insists that no such incident ever took place and the New York Division for Youth denies that such a brutal reformatory ever existed. And no one from the neighborhood who still lives there ever recalls such a story.

Did Carcaterra make up his story from whole cloth? No, it appears that the book and movie are a composite drawn from many sources, among which is the book *The Westies*, a story about a notorious Irish gang from Hell's Kitchen. By cutting and splicing, Carcaterra mended his tale together, selling it as though it were the real thing.

On October 16, 1995, Catholic League president William Donohue wrote to Peter Gethers, the editor of *Sleepers* at Ballantine Books (a division of Random House), stating that "this matter can be resolved rather quickly, providing you give a sworn affidavit stating that your account is true, and providing you are willing to make public the names of the priest and the Assistant District Attorney." No reply was forthcoming and Gethers never responded to Donohue's later request for a meeting to discuss the authenticity of the book.

The official position of the movie studio is that the names and locations of the true story have been altered. Nonetheless, the movie opens with the statement, "This is a true story." Screenwriter and director Barry Levinson has said that "Any one of the major elements could have happened. What is the need to know its exact authenticity?" But when a

Catholic school and a Catholic priest are negatively portrayed—and then passed on as though it were true—the public has a right to know the “exact authenticity” of the claims.

Donohue and Callahan met in 1995 with a lawyer from the New York State Attorney General’s office to discuss *Sleepers*. Though sympathetic, the lawyer did not believe that there was much that could be done legally.

Had the book been published as a novel, there would be no controversy. Even the *New York Times* has been suspicious, placing the book on its best-seller list by adding “The true story, the narrator **claims**, of four boys in a reformatory and the revenge they later take” (emphasis added). News reports by the *Times* also express suspicion about the book.

Crime authors have been particularly angry with author Carcaterra. Jack Olsen, the “Dean of True Crime,” has said that the book is a fraud and should be republished as a novel. Olsen was one of seven crime authors who signed a letter denouncing *Sleepers* as “fictitious.”

Book reviewers have also been wary. Christopher Lehmann-Haupt of the *New York Times* described portions of the book as “inauthentic,” “disturbingly inconsistent,” “indistinct,” and “impossibly imprecise.” *Time* said “Not since Joe McGinnis began dreaming up things that Senator Kennedy might have thought...has there been such an elastic and accommodating definition of nonfiction as Carcaterra’s.” He labeled the book “preposterous” and riddled with “internal contradictions.”

The *Washington Post* charged that Carcaterra is “trying to have it both ways—the urgency of reality plus the freedom of fiction.” Cox News Service headlined its review, “*Sleepers*’ So Phony It Ought To Be A Crime.” *Newsday* offered the following: “This is the stuff of countless entertaining Hollywood movies and paperback novels. Unfortunately, Carcaterra convinced himself he could get away with the ruse.”

By the time this edition of *Catalyst* is printed, the Catholic League will have held a press conference to discuss the movie. We will report on subsequent events in the December *Catalyst*. In the meantime, please send Warner Brothers the enclosed postcard.

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## **POLITICS AND RELIGION: THE DOUBLE STANDARD**

We spend much of our time at the Catholic League fighting double standards: there seems to be one set of rules for those who are not Catholic and another for those who are. Nowhere is this more true than in the old battleground of politics and religion.

On September 22, Rev. Al Sharpton formally announced that he wanted to be the next mayor of New York. Fine, let him enter the ring. But he was wrong to do this from the pulpit of Canaan Baptist Church in Harlem.

Imagine for one moment what the reaction would be if a Catholic priest declared his candidacy for public office from a church (forget for a moment that Church rules bar the clergy from running for office). The media would be in a frenzy. Or just think how crazy the press would be if a Catholic priest turned over his Sunday Mass to a politician running for office. But Protestant churches get away with this all the time, and no one seems to care. Here are some examples.

When Rev. Jesse Jackson ran for president in 1984 and 1988, he did so by stumping in churches. Indeed, in 1988, he raised monies for his campaign inside black churches. No one said a word.

In August 1993, while New York Mayor David Dinkins was speaking at the Church of the Intercession, challenger Rudolph Giuliani was giving his political pitch from Harlem's Safe Mission Christian Fellowship Church. Neither Dinkins nor Giuliani was criticized for doing so.

In September 1993, the National Baptist Convention met in Madison Square Garden. Invited to speak were New York Governor Mario Cuomo, New Jersey Governor Jim Florio, Connecticut Governor Lowell Weicker, and Illinois Senator Carol Mosely Braun. No one carped. But if a Catholic conference had opened its doors to a bunch of politicians, the press would have been howling.

Furthermore, just think of the outcry that would have greeted a Catholic conference if it had given \$10,000 to a candidate running for public office. But nothing was said when at the same National Baptist Convention Mayor Dinkins of New York received just such a contribution!

In the fall of 1994, President Clinton urged the congregation at Bethel Church in Harlem to vote for Mario Cuomo. No one from the media protested. Nor did anyone object that fall when Governor George Pataki spoke at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem.

In 1995, President Clinton's own Foundry Methodist Church was known to distribute literature denouncing the Republican's Contract with America, but no one thought this objectionable. In July of this year, Hillary Clinton spoke at the

African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, arguing that Jesus would have liked her health plan. Again, no one chided her for doing so.

The lesson is clear: if Catholic churches become a forum for electioneering, that's a violation of church and state, but if Protestant churches are used for political purposes, that's okay.

Why the double standard? There is still the sneaking suspicion that Catholics have a hidden agenda to Catholicize the nation. If you don't believe me, then write to the National Conference (formally National Conference of Christians and Jews) and ask for last year's survey of the American people. In it you will find that America's number one prejudice is held by non-Catholics against Catholics. The majority of the American people (55%) believe that Catholics "want to impose their own ideas of morality on the larger society."

The evidence, of course, is not supportive of this prejudice. It is true that the Catholic Church proposes ideas to the public, not all of which are accepted by Catholics (never mind others), but in no way can it be said that these proposals take the form of an imposition. If anything, as we have seen, it is Protestants, not Catholics, who use churches to advance political objectives. But evidence means little to those who harbor deep prejudices.

The argument to be made here is not that Catholic churches should become more like Protestant churches in this regard, but just the opposite: Protestant churches should mimic Catholic churches. If church and state lines mean anything, they mean that churches, synagogues, mosques and other houses of worship should be free from raw politics. Let the candidates meet in church basements, if necessary, but by all means bar the church door from political huckstering.

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## **PETA SMEARS BOYS TOWN**

In the fall edition of "Animal Times," People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) sharply criticized the Boys Town National Research Hospital for doing research on animals; the

hospital received nearly \$3 million in U.S. grants for experiments on cats. What the Catholic League objected to is the opening statement in the article entitled, "Boys Town: May God Forgive Them!" The following is a direct quote:

"While a kindly priest named Father Flanagan was turning Boys Town into a world-famous home for troubled boys, he never dreamed that a few decades later, in the 1980s, his haven would be involved in a scandalous pedophile ring. Now, a PETA undercover investigator has found shocking evidence that something has gone wrong at the Nebraska Boys Town."

The Catholic League registered its outrage about this incident in a release to the media:

"PETA professes concern about ethical treatment, yet it has no qualms about treating Boys Town unethically. Whether PETA is lying, or is purely ignorant of the facts, is not known. But this much is true: there never was a pedophile ring associated with Boys Town. Indeed, spokesmen for Boys Town have already branded PETA's smear 'malicious libel.'

"In 1990, a grand jury in Douglas County totally absolved Boys Town of any wrongdoing stemming from charges of sexual misconduct. Indeed, the Grand Jury Report said that it 'believes that the Omaha community should acknowledge the positive influence of Boys Town in dealing with troubled young people. Boys Town is an asset to the community as well as to the nation.'

"It is mind-boggling that PETA would make such irresponsible charges, especially in light of court records. It is no wonder that PETA has heard from the former General Counsel for Father Flanagan's Boys' Home. At the very least, PETA owes Boys Town a public apology. It also owes all American Catholics an apology for its slanderous remarks."

The Berrigan Brothers, Phil and Dan, were also peeved by what happened. But what got their goat was animal research being

conducted by Boys Town, not the scurrilous attack that PETA waged on the Catholic organization. Some things never change.

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## MTV FAILS AT BEING FUNNY

MTV's "Ren and Stimpy Show" features a animated character known as Powdered Toast Man (PTM). The program of September 19 showed PTM rescuing the Pope from being blown up by dynamite. PTM flies away from the bomb with the Pope clinging desperately to his back. Noticing that the Pope is slipping away, PTM tells the Pope, "Quick, man, cling tenaciously to my buttocks." The Pope answers, "Both of them?" and then squeezes his buttocks while placing his head against it.

While this is hardly the worst thing we've seen at the Catholic League, it does represent the never-ending fascination that some in the media have with taking a shot at Catholicism while pretending to be funny.

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## OFF-BROADWAY PLAY MOCKS CATHOLICISM

William Donohue attended the preview of the off-Broadway play, *Late Night Catechism*, and issued the following remarks to the press:

"*Late Night Catechism* continues the artistic assault on Roman Catholicism by ridiculing virtually every aspect of



Catholicism. Jesus, Mary, Joseph, the Saints, the sacraments, Catholic schools, Catholic customs—nothing is considered too off-base to merit derision. In particular, the Virgin Mary is held up to disparagement in a most offensive way. Every caricature imaginable about Catholics finds its way into this play.

“This is an interactive play, meaning that members of the audience get a chance to vent their own experiences and feelings about Catholicism. Predictably, the crowd is only too willing to add to the tenor of the play by contributing nuggets of scorn. The sexual statements that the play makes about Catholic beliefs and practices are unusually coarse.

“What is perhaps most offensive about the play is its venue: St. Luke’s Lutheran Church. That a Lutheran church would host a play that mocks another religion is not only irresponsible, it rips at ecumenical dialogue. It is a telling commentary that advertisements about *Late Night Catechisms* simply say that it appears at St. Luke’s Church on W.46 Street. If the play’s sponsors and the church’s pastor were honest, they would not hesitate to emphasize that it is a Lutheran church that is hosting this attack on Catholicism.”

Donohue wrote directly to the pastor of St. Luke’s Lutheran Church, Rev. Dale Hansen, posing the question, “Why would a pastor of a Lutheran church host a play that did nothing but mock another religion?” Should we hear something, we will let our readers know Rev. Hansen’s response.

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## SMITHSONIAN HOSTS SERRANO

The Smithsonian Institute recently invited artist Andres Serrano to begin Hispanic Heritage Month. Serrano is most

known for his artistic contribution of placing a crucifix in a jar of his own urine, an enterprise that was funded with federal money. Bill Donohue wrote the following letter of protest over this issue.

September 18, 1996

Mr. David Umansky  
Communications Director  
Smithsonian Institute  
1000 Jefferson Dr., S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20560

Dear Mr. Umansky:

As president of the nation's largest Catholic civil rights organization, I am outraged that the Smithsonian would invite Andres Serrano to open Hispanic Heritage Month at the Smithsonian. It is no secret that Serrano is most famous for his profoundly vulgar and anti-Christian work, "Piss Christ." Anyone who drops a crucifix in a jar of urine to make a statement obviously is not worthy of the honor that the Smithsonian has bestowed on him.

The Hispanic community does not lack for serious artists, and therefore the selection of Serrano strikes me as being not only offensive, but politically motivated as well. Serrano is known for his exhibitions involving dead animals, brains, blood and urine and now the Smithsonian finds him deserving of even more kudos. Had he dropped the Star of David in a jar of urine, it is doubtful that the Smithsonian would ever invite him to speak. So why the double standard?

You are quoted as saying that Serrano was selected "because of the body of his work." But the body of his work is degrading and his only claim to fame is blasphemous. If this is your idea of multiculturalism, it is pretty sick.

What is particularly obnoxious about all this is that the

federal government is actually giving legitimacy to bigots. First Serrano gets public funding for his assault on Christianity and now the Smithsonian gives him center stage. Yet if an artist were to reverentially treat a symbol held sacred by Catholics and Protestants, would he or she receive public funding or recognition by the state? No, then all we would hear is the chorus about church and state. Again, the duplicity is obvious.

I would enjoy seeing your response. Meanwhile, we'll let our members, the Congress and the U.S. Bishops know of the Smithsonian's quality of discernment.

Sincerely,  
William A. Donohue  
President

At press time, we still had not heard from the Smithsonian.

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## OKLAHOMA CITY ARCHDIOCESE DUMPS DISNEY

On September 17, the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City formally announced that it would divest the Archdiocese of all stock in the Walt Disney Corporation. The decision by Archbishop Eusebius J. Beltran cited the work of the Catholic League: "This action has been taken in light of recent actions which we consider not only blatantly anti-Catholic but objectionable to Christians of many denominations. We have found ourselves guided in this action through a careful study of numerous documents published by **Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights** of New York.

The Catholic League welcomes the decision by Archbishop Beltran and is particularly pleased that our work was helpful in his ruling. Congratulations to the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City!

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## ASIA SOCIETY DEFENDS “ART”

Last month's *Catalyst* carried a story about the Asia Society's new exhibition, “Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions.” It was the display of *House of Sin* that led to a protest by the league. This contribution to Asian culture, and now ours, depicts a drunken Catholic cleric holding a chalice; a dead boy appears next to him.

In response Dr. Vishakha N. Desai, Vice President for Cultural Programs and Director of the Galleries, wrote that “The very nature of this art, particularly as it has been evolving in many Asian societies, is dissenting and critical.” He letter added that “we do not as an organization wish to offend any group or individual” and “we regret that you may have felt offense but hope you understand the educational mission of our organization.”

But whoever said that it was on the wish-list of Asia Society to offend Catholics? All we said is that we were offended. And what is this nonsense about us Catholics understanding the “educational mission” of Asia Society? We at the Catholic League have an “educational mission” as well, and part of it extends to educating those who have offended Catholics as to the nature of their offense.

Wouldn't it have been much more honest for Dr. Desai to simply say that Asia Society likes *House of Sin*? But, of course, then we would have been forced to ask why.

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# GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA SCHOOL DRAWS LEAGUE PROTEST

Grimsley High School, part of the Guilford County Schools in Greensboro, North Carolina, offended area Catholics by assigning a book to students that treats Catholicism in a despicable fashion. Dr. Donohue wrote a letter explaining the league's position. He made it clear that while he recognized the legal right of school authorities to assign such a work, he still felt it was an irresponsible act that deserved corrective action.

Donohue's letter, printed below, was sent to every member of the school board, as well as others.

Dr. Jerry Weast  
Superintendent, Guilford Co. Schools  
P.O. Box 880  
Greensboro, NC 27402  
Dear Dr. Weast:

I am writing with regards to the controversy surrounding the use of "The Old Gringo" in Grimsley High School. As president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, the nation's largest Catholic civil rights organization, and as a life-long educator and author, I have special interest in this matter.

Let me begin by saying that I am opposed to any governmental edict that would bar the use of "The Old Gringo." But I am also opposed to the wisdom that found this book suitable for high school students. To put it differently, conceding the legal right to allow this book to be used does not exhaust the issue: there is a responsibility to the teaching

profession and a moral obligation to the sentiments of the community that must weigh heavily in any educational decision.

It is certainly true that educators need not avoid presenting works to high school students that may make them feel uncomfortable. But feeling uncomfortable is not the equivalent of feeling abused, and it is the latter sentiment that is operative here. Quite simply, there are parts of this book that are downright degrading and offensive to Catholic sensibilities.

According to a press report, William Buczinsky, who teaches the class wherein "The Old Gringo" is used, believes that "people in Latin America tend to use more references to sex and irreverence toward catholicism [sic] in their everyday language." It would be more accurate to say that the references are sexually explicit at best, and obscene at worst. It would also be more accurate to say that "The Old Gringo" is not treating Catholicism with irreverence, but with contempt. And since when was it considered anything but a slam on Hispanics to say that their literature is known for the liberties it takes with Catholicism, especially given the fact that Catholicism is the most commonly practiced religion in Latin America?

It is also interesting to read that in the responses offered by the Grimsley Site-Base/Media Advisory Committee, it was reported by one member that it is the business of Guilford County Schools Board of Education policies "to provide various points of view about issues, including those considered to be controversial—Many people will believe that the Catholic Church acted improperly in the colonization of Mexico and the U.S."

Books that defame Judaism are surely controversial as well, but no one who defends "The Old Gringo" would dare defend a Jew-baiting book on the grounds that the author has been

well-received in some quarters. Perhaps more important is the incredible ignorance of this committee member: exactly what historical evidence is there to support the charge that the Catholic Church colonized Mexico and the U.S.? If this is being taught in the schools, then there is more than anti-Catholicism at work, there is academic malpractice as well.

There are some who say that "The Old Gringo" can be defended because students can opt not to read it. But this is disingenuous: objections to the book are not relieved because the target audience of its offense, namely Catholics, may choose not to read it. A book that offended African Americans would not be selected with the proviso that blacks could choose to read something else. It simply would not be chosen.

The most responsible course of action would be for all those involved in the choosing of "The Old Gringo" to decide on another book by a talented Hispanic writer. At the very least, a statement to the students in their outline reporting that many Roman Catholics find "The Old Gringo" offensive to their religion should be approved by school authorities. Moreover, it would be a useful pedagogical exercise to discuss why Catholics feel this way. Not to do so would be to invite all students to think that anti-Catholicism is an acceptable "perspective."

It is amazing that those who would censor a book that taught the merits of Catholicism—funded with public monies—have no problem defending a book that maligns it. With public monies!

Just recently, Northern Kentucky University had the courage to stop an artistic exhibition that assaulted Catholicism. It would be refreshing to learn that the high school educators in North Carolina exercised the same courage in dealing with this issue.

Sincerely,  
William A. Donohue  
President

cc: School Board Members; Dr. Mike Priddy; Robin Bergeron

On September 26, Dr. Donohue received a letter from Dr. Weast stating that "You have presented interesting and valid points and I will forward your correspondence to appropriate school personnel for their review and consideration." The league is waiting to see whether Donohue's "valid points" will be validated by the school board.

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## **NEWS SHOW FLAGS OBSCENITY AGAINST POPE**

On Sunday, September 22, WABC-TV's "Eyewitness New," the New York affiliate of ABC, aired a segment on the Pope's trip to France. In this segment, protesters were shown greeting the Pope and an obscene sign held by one of the activists was given prominence by the cameraman. The sign read, "Pope Off, You F\_\_\_ing Old B\_\_\_\_\_." The camera zeroed in on the sign making it easy to read.

After examining the news clip, Bill Donohue called WABC to protest. At first, his discussion with assistant news director Bart Feder seemed to get nowhere, but after hearing the totality of Donohue's complaint, Feder admitted that the channel erred and apologized.

Apparently, a person who does not read English at WABC was given the assignment and was unaware of what the sign said. Nonetheless, the league believes that the news studio bears full responsibility for what happened. Donohue was reassured



that this would never happen again.