

MEDIA BINGE OVER “NOTHING SACRED”; CLINTON ASKED TO REPLY

When the Catholic League first registered its objections to the ABC show, “Nothing Sacred,” it had no idea that it would create such a whirlwind of publicity. Nor did it think that it would be asking President Clinton to make a statement regarding the show at a Rose Garden conference attended by league president William Donohue.

As media interest in the league’s protest grew, and as ABC itself struck back with a press conference responding to the league’s charges, it soon became apparent that this was an issue that wouldn’t die a quick death. Even Michael Eisner, the chairman of Disney (Disney owns ABC) attacked the league without provocation in an interview he did with *Business Week*.

The league was particularly pleased with the strong response from the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. Father Gregory Coiro, the Director of Media Relations for the archdiocese, was unequivocal in his criticisms of the show. Father Coiro also defended the league’s position before the media.

Unfortunately, a number of priests reviewed the pilot favorably. Worse, some of the writers for the series are priests. The league, of course, always presses its independence by respectfully disagreeing with these assessments.

It was in late June that the league first learned of the fall show, “Nothing Sacred.” We spotted a piece in *Entertainment Weekly* and were sent copies of advance reviews in various newspapers by our loyal members. *Entertainment Weekly* described the lead character, Father Ray, as an “irreverent priest who questions the existence of God, feels

lust in his heart, and touches people's souls." The *Tampa Tribune* and the *Orange County Register* expressed similar thoughts.

We then tapped into ABC's website to see what they were saying; we also called the network and they faxed us over the promotional material. Here's is how ABC framed its remarks:

"It's tough being a priest in the '90s, just ask Father Ray (Kevin Anderson). In one morning alone, he has nearly been fired for advising a pregnant teenager to follow her own instincts. He has had to turn down a bribe in the confessional, even though he's desperate for money to keep his church afloat. His college flame has just walked back into his life and reignited old passions. And now his mentor is asking him to deliver a sermon proving the existence of God. How should he know if God exists?...he hasn't even read the book yet!"

On July 10, the league issued its first news release on the show, stating, in part, the following: "The last time Disney portrayed the Catholic clergy was in its Miramax production, 'Priest,' and now it appears that it is picking up where it left off by providing viewers with another sick look at priests."

On July 24, after watching the pilot to the program, William Donohue said that the show was "worse than expected"; here is what he said:

"There are two major objections to 'Nothing Sacred': a) the show promotes the most positive stereotype of Catholics who dissent from Church teachings while fostering the most negative stereotype of those who remain loyal to the Church and b) the show deliberately denigrates the official teachings of the Church by unfavorably contrasting them to the trendy positions of dissenting Catholics.

"The leading priest, Father Ray, comes from a dysfunctional

family, thinks of his vocation as merely a job, admits that he isn't sure of the existence of God, violates his duty as a confessor and rejects the Church's teachings on sexuality. But he loves the homeless, ponders a love affair with an old flame and tells his adversaries to 'go fax yourself.' Quite naturally, those Catholics who accept the teachings of the Magisterium are portrayed as cold-hearted, selfish and tyrannical persons.

"It is amazing to hear Father Ray tell his parishioners that it's time to 'call a moratorium on the sins of the flesh'; he then says that the Church's teachings on homosexuality, promiscuity, abortion and contraception can be ignored because the Bible says little or nothing about them. He boasts that he will no longer be a 'sexual traffic cop' and advises those who want such a priest to go elsewhere.

"This Disney/ABC show is nothing more than a political statement against the Catholic Church. The goal is to put a positive spin on Catholic priests who prefer Hollywood's libertine vision of sexuality to the moral teachings of the Church. This propaganda is fodder for dissenting Catholics and anti-Catholic bigots alike. We hope that others will join with us in what is only the beginning of our protest.

"Disney/ABC would never put a positive spin on a priest who rejected the Church's teachings on welfare reform, nuclear war, immigration and the death penalty, for to do so would be to undermine their own politics. On the other hand, if they really believe that Father Ray is not offensive, then why not make him a black minister or a Jewish rabbi?"

The league's next step was to ask Michael Eisner to reveal the names of the five priests whom Eisner publicly said reviewed the pilot favorably. The response from Disney Vice President for Corporate Communications, John Dreyer, was to say, "I am sure that you will understand that we do not distribute the names, addresses or phone numbers of people with whom we

consult.”

It is interesting to note that when co-executive producer David Manson and another ABC official were to meet with Father Coiro, they declined the opportunity to do so once they learned that Donohue was going to attend. Manson said, “we are not prepared to meet with him.”

Things came to a head when the White House called to invite Donohue to attend a Rose Garden speech on religious liberty that President Clinton was scheduled to make on August 14. Donohue agreed to go, but he also released a statement to the press announcing his latest strategy.

DONOHUE ATTENDS WHITE HOUSE ADDRESS

At the invitation of the White House, William Donohue attended an address by President Clinton on religious liberty in the federal workplace. The following is Donohue’s assessment of the speech that was released to the media:

“Overall, the President’s executive order on the rights of religious expression in the federal workplace is a welcome clarification of existing law. Regrettably, no Catholic was invited to participate in the drafting of this statement. What makes this even worse, is that since May, the White House has had no official appointed liaison to the Catholic community. Together, these two factors suggest that the voice of Catholics is not important for the White House to hear. This is mind-boggling given the fact that one in every four Americans is Catholic.

“If there is one area that the federal guidelines did not address, it is the right of Christians to have the identical rights that the Jewish community presently enjoys with regard to religious expression in U. S. post offices. To be specific, menorahs are erected every year in post offices across the country, yet no post office is permitted to display a crèche. This is troubling given the fact that the U. S. Supreme Court has declared menorahs to be every bit as religious as nativity scenes are. Therefore, while this executive order is appreciated, there is still room for much needed improvement.”

FROM VOYEURISM TO IMPERIALISM

William A. Donohue

Perhaps the most aggravating aspect of “Nothing Sacred” is the audacity of the executive producers, David Manson and Richard Kramer, to admit that it is their purpose to create “dialogue” among Catholics about the teachings of their church. Who ever asked—or appointed—these two men, both of whom are Jewish and both of whom believe in nothing, to foment dialogue in my church?

That three of the five writers for the show have been identified as Catholic puts the lie to the argument that there is a “Jewish” cabal at work. But I still want to press the issue of the propriety of someone who is outside the Church appropriating to himself the right to create dialogue about my religion.

On July 22, ABC held a press conference to answer the charges of the Catholic League. Manson began by wondering aloud how “I’m going to sit up in front of 200 people and explain how a Jew is doing a piece about a Catholic priest.” That’s a stupid

way to begin. As Michael Medved has shown, it was nothing but Jews who produced the finest movies about Catholics in the 1930s and 1940s. The real question is why so many Jews and others in Hollywood today are bent on making movies about Catholics that smack of a politically correct agenda.

It used to be that those who were not Catholic and had a beef with the Church were content on being voyeurs, that is, they would look, listen, talk and write about the Church in a most curious way. But those days are gone: we've now hit the stage where attempts to literally manipulate public opinion is commonplace; this represents a shift from voyeurism to imperialism.

"One of our goals," said David Manson, "is to subvert people's expectations as to the nature of a priest's or nun's life in the contemporary world." What he didn't say is that the purpose of this subversion is to put a positive spin on a priest who rejects the Church's idea of sexual ethics, thereby endearing him to "progressive" Catholics and to those non-Catholics who also find fault with the Church in this area.

Manson has a highly politicized understanding of dialogue. He explicitly says that his aim is "to create dialogue where not very much exists." But there is very little dialogue among Jews about groups like Jews for Jesus, yet Manson wouldn't think of doing a show that creates dialogue among Jews by favorably portraying a leader from this marginalized group.

The term "dialogue," when used in this context, is dishonest. It's not about dialogue, it's about dissent. What it comes down to is that Manson and Kramer are architects of the raw use of Hollywood's political muscle to undermine respect for the Magisterium. How they pull this off is interesting.

First, they create a priest who serves the needy by tending to his soup kitchen. Then they show him openly proclaiming the folly of the Church's teachings on sexuality. This is followed

by his unwillingness to counsel against abortion in the confessional. What it boils down to is this: this is a Nineties kind of priest—he's compassionate, not hung up on sex and bravely autonomous. On the other hand, those parishioners who complain about the homeless who use their neighborhood as bathrooms are depicted as heartless, though loyal, Catholics (read: it is because they're loyal that they're heartless).

The dichotomy that is at work here is obvious. Catholics who care about the poor are also smart enough to accept contraception, abortion, homosexuality and promiscuity, while those who would grind their heels in the face of the poor (they're called "yuppie scum" by Father Ray) are dumb enough to swallow the Church's moonshine about sexuality.

All of which brings me back to my first point: "Nothing Sacred" is political propaganda against the Magisterium being waged by producers who are outsiders. It is no more their business to concern themselves with the degree of dialogue that exists within the Catholic Church than it is the business of Catholic broadcasters to concern themselves with the degree of dialogue that exists between secular and religious Jews. Just imagine the reaction if a Catholic band sang songs that glorified orthodox Jews at the expense of those who never attend synagogue!

It all comes down to sex. Hollywood can't get enough of it and any institution that preaches the virtue of restraint is bound to be seen as the enemy. That is why attempts to undermine the moral authority of the Church to pronounce on matters sexual will not abate any time too soon. It also signals why the Catholic League will never walk away from a fight.

A POLITICAL AGENDA MARS ABC'S "NOTHING SACRED"

The following Op-Ed article was published in the *Los Angeles Times* on August 11, 1997.

Howard Rosenberg ("Nothing Sacred, but Much Ventured," August 6) likes the pilot to ABC's "Nothing Sacred" but confesses that he understands why some Catholics might be troubled, if not outraged, by the show. Let me explain why.

The central problem with the show is its blatantly political agenda: Catholics who follow the Church's teachings are painted as cold-hearted authoritarians who are knee-deep in ritual while those who dissent from the Church are seen as compassionate, likable persons who actually practice Christian virtues.

It is not for nothing that the good guys who dissent do not reject the Church's teachings on welfare reform, immigration, nuclear weapons and the death penalty. No, what they reject are the Church's teachings on sexuality. In other words, the dissidents entertain a view of sexuality that matches very well with the perspective as entertained by many in Hollywood.

Father Ray is quite a guy. When he's not tending to his soup kitchen he's instructing the faithful that it's time to "call a moratorium on the sins of the flesh." To be specific, he openly denounces the Church's teachings on abortion, contraception, homosexuality and promiscuity and declares that he's tired of being a "sexual traffic cop." We are then told that this homily was such a hit that donations are up. Dream on—the typical practicing Catholic wouldn't give another dime if he heard such nonsense.

The confessional scene is exceptional. A young woman, troubled by the prospect of an abortion, seeks guidance. And what does

Father Ray tell her? Go make up your own mind. Had she been contemplating smoking, no doubt this politically-correct priest would have counseled differently.

What conjoins the homily and the confessional scene is a statement against the magisterium. The magisterium is the Church's authoritative teaching body, comprised of the pope in communion with the bishops. Priests are expected to follow those rules just the way deans are expected to follow the rules of the college president. Father Ray, of course, is seen as a hero because he is exercising his autonomy (insubordination would be more accurate) against the magisterium on a subject that delights the heart of progressives.

David Manson, co-executive producer of the show, has expressed anxiety about "a Jew doing a piece about a Catholic priest." He has nothing to fear as the finest movies ever made about Catholics were produced by Jews. On the other hand, there is something strange about Manson's position that it is his aim "to create dialogue where not very much exists."

I have just one question for Manson: there is very little dialogue among Jews regarding groups like Jews for Jesus, so why doesn't he—or better yet, a creative Catholic producer—do a show on that topic? To be fair, a positive spin must be put on Jews for Jesus.

This is pure chutzpah. It is no more the business of Manson to create dialogue (read: dissent) among Catholics than it is the business of corporate foundations to fund anti-Catholic front groups like Catholics for a Free Choice. The reason they can't resist is because they loathe the Catholic Church's teachings on sexuality.

No one is saying that the only acceptable image of Catholics is the *Song of Bernadette* or the *Bells of St. Mary's*. But something is wrong when, as Howard Rosenberg notes, for nearly

a half-century viewers have been treated to “puking on the pious.” Isn’t it time conventional Catholics were treated better?

William A. Donohue, Ph.D.
President
Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights

LETTER TO CLINTON

August 8, 1997

Hon. William Jefferson Clinton
President
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

I am honored that I have been invited to attend your speech on religious liberty this Thursday and look forward to hearing your remarks. It is my hope that you will address the ABC show, “Nothing Sacred,” which debuts on September 18. From the enclosed news releases, you can see why the Catholic League is so troubled by this program.

On January 20, 1995, I published an open letter to you on the Op-Ed page of the New York Times registering my misgivings with your administration’s approach to Catholic sensibilities. However, more recently, I have written favorably of your support for religious liberty in the schools. In particular, your splendid 1995 memo to Janet Reno and Richard Riley, as well as your steadfast support in *Agostini v. Felton*, demonstrates your much appreciated concerns for the religious

liberties of Catholics. And, of course, your courageous defense of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act was noticed by many observers.

Just this week, your wife spoke out against the pro-smoking image of Julia Roberts in "My Best Friend's Wedding." It would be great if you, too, spoke out against another objectionable Hollywood portrayal, namely the exploitative and highly politicized depiction of Catholic priests in "Nothing Sacred."

Thank you for your consideration.

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

SEVENTH DAY ADVENTISTS STRIKE AGAIN

Over the past few years, we have noticed that the Seventh Day Adventists have taken an aggressively public stand against the Catholic Church. The ads they have taken out in major newspapers have all maligned Catholicism. Our position has been to challenge the editors of these dailies not to accept any more of these ads. The latest venue for this hate was the *Washington Times*.

Twice during the early summer, once in the daily edition and once in the weekly edition, the *Washington Times* published a full-page ad by the Seventh Day Adventists. Entitled "Earth's Final Warning," the ad features a picture of Pope John Paul II and President Clinton, both of whom are smiling. Much of the ad is given over to rebutting Sunday as the Sabbath and

painting the Catholic Church as the “Mother of Harlots” etc.

In a letter to the editor of the *Washington Times*, Wesley Pruden, league president William Donohue informed him that the league had successfully protested these ads in other newspapers and requested that Pruden follow suit by rejecting any future ads. Pruden’s response was encouraging.

Pruden began by saying that “I’m a Baptist, and I was no less deeply offended by the ad, too.” He made it clear that as editor he bore no responsibility for the ad, but he did say that he took this issue up with those whose job it is to approve advertising. He added that “I think this won’t happen again” and asked Donohue to “Please bear with me.”

Pruden ended his letter by saying that “I appreciate your support, and assure you of my deep respect for the pope and all the good that the Roman Catholic Church does throughout the world.” The league also appreciates Pruden’s professionalism.

THE POPE AS MARTIAL ARTIST?

Director Roger Corman has announced that he is looking for a top comedy star to play the lead in a new movie he is contemplating, “Vatican Air Two”. Struck by the success of “Air Force One”, Corman decided that it would be great to do an action-adventure comedy that features the pope as a martial artist who battles bad guys on his private jet.

This one sounds more like Hollywood stupidity than bigotry.

TUFTS LUCK

It was tough luck for Tufts University that a responsible Unitarian minister blew the whistle on the school's presentation of the play, "Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?" The minister, Reverend Scotty McClennan, contacted the Catholic League in July once he learned that the play was scheduled for performance in August. The league jumped on this immediately by purchasing a copy of the script from a New York publishing house.

There are many parts of the play that are offensive. While it does not contain the vile sexual statements that have often colored other anti-Catholic plays, it does mock the Sacrament of Reconciliation and it promotes a negative stereotype of nuns and priests. That is why we wrote to the Dean of Students, Bobbie Knable, stating that if the play had been "racist or anti-Semitic," we have no doubt how it would have been received by school officials.

In August, Reverend McClennan told us that the school was concerned that the play would be seen during Freshman Orientation and consequently decided to move it until September 2. While that was preferable (it is not likely that many would attend a school play the day after Labor Day), it still wasn't satisfactory.

This time we wrote directly to the president of Tufts, John DiBiaggio; we asked him to cancel the play. We argued that by deciding to reschedule the performance, "This suggests a tacit understanding on the part of school officials that there is something egregiously offensive about this play."

Even if the play is performed, we feel that an important

message was sent. And we're delighted that we have such a good friend in Reverend McClennan.

BARRON'S NEEDS REMEDIAL ED

A few years ago, Barron's, the famous test-prep company, published a crude excerpt from the work of James Agee in *How to Prepare for the ACT* (Second Edition). The selection was taken from the late author's award-winning book, *A Death in the Family*. The league objected on two grounds: a) the excerpt smacked of anti-Catholicism and b) it was hardly necessary to include it as it was chosen as a reading comprehension test.

Barron's replied that "it would not consider censoring or withholding an excerpt from a book with such lofty credentials." But whoever asked them to censor anything? All we suggested was that they find "a more appropriate selection" in the next edition. And while we're at it, would Barron's select the most racist portion of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* for inclusion in a test of reading comprehension? After all, didn't Twain also have "lofty credentials"?

Here's the good news: Barron's confessed that the selection we objected to will not appear in the next edition.

WHAT'S THAT GOT TO DO WITH

IT?

We recently sent a letter to Christopher Noble, the owner and publisher of a line of greeting cards, protesting one of his cards that parodied a priest kissing the Pope's ring. Because the card wasn't the most offensive one we've seen, we made a fairly mild complaint. We simply said, "We appeal to your sense of fairness and goodwill and ask that you consider the sensibilities of your Catholic customers in the development and promotion of your cards in the future." What we got back in response was another story altogether.

"I am a mature man," wrote Noble, "with a successful business and a happy home." Great, we thought. "I have many loved ones including two God children who I help support and nurture," he informed. This also sounds great, as does his next line, "I contribute more each year to charity than some people make." Still, we're wondering, what does this have to do with our complaint?

His next comment was also puzzling: "I am a self-made man who had to struggle and claw to find success and happiness." So? Then he unloads with, "I am also a homosexual. That is why I have had to struggle." With that off his chest, we were still left wondering, what's that got to do with it? We should have known.

"It is a horror," explained Noble, "how many lives of homosexual men the Catholic church has directly ruined. I was strong enough to survive. Many others are not." Good gracious. We never thought that the Church's teaching that sexual relations should be confined to marriage was responsible for so much misery, but now we know just how wrong we were. "The Catholic Church," he continued, "spreads, bigotry, intolerance and homophobia throughout the world," and that is why Noble told us that he has no concern "for respecting any Catholic institution, most notably the Pope."

We particularly liked Noble's remark, "The Pope doesn't *recognizer* [sic] my God given right to be the person I am" (our emphasis). That isn't true, but the last thing we want Noble to think is that we don't recognizer his right to be wrong.