

THE CATHOLIC LEAGUE AT 25 (1973-1998)

William A. Donohue

On April 16, the Catholic League will celebrate its 25th anniversary with a dinner at The Plaza in New York City (see p. 7 for the details). There is much to celebrate, as well as much to focus on down the road.

Were it not for Virgil C. Blum, S.J., there would be no Catholic League. The founder of the Catholic League, Father Blum was a Marquette University professor of political science who had a vision for the Catholic laity that was, and still is, a fairly radical idea: he wanted Catholic men and women to become full participants in society, bringing their informed Catholic conscience to bear on the reigning issues of the day. The problem, he often said, was that Catholics were political pygmies, and that is why he characterized them in 1983 as “chumps, patsies, dopes, born-every-minute suckers.”

Those are harsh words. But consider the context: he wrote that at a time when it seemed that every other group in society was passing us by, long after the civil rights movement had been launched. Rights mania had gripped the nation, touching blacks, women, homosexuals, migrant farm workers, students, the handicapped, Indians, Hispanics, Asians, aliens—everyone, it seemed, but Catholics (Jews had long since established the Anti-Defamation League).

It was against this background that Father Blum set forth his agenda. He knew that from the beginning of our nation's history, Catholics had struggled for acceptance, looking mostly to the clergy for guidance. In terms of discrimination, Catholics had made progress, but in terms of engaging the culture, they had largely adopted the Greyhound mentality,

leaving the driving to others. That had to change.

Most of those who experienced rights mania entertained a narrow view, seeking a greater slice of the American pie for themselves. Father Blum had a very different understanding: he wanted to transform public policy and the culture, making society better not only for Catholics, but for everyone else. The American ideals of liberty, justice and equality, he reasoned, could not be achieved unless the Church was more vocal and lay Catholics more assertive. This is what the Catholic League was set up to do.

Blum's writings concentrated heavily on the schools, the judiciary, the media, the culture, abortion and political participation. He saw two major problems with the schools—the lack of choice and the collapse of values. A tireless champion of vouchers and tuition tax credits, Blum was outraged that teachers, politicians and judges worked hard to deny parents the right to place their children in a parochial school. With regard to the curriculum, Blum joined with many in denouncing what a sham a so-called value-free education was.

Blum was rightfully upset with the courts. None of the rulings we now live with on abortion, pornography, students' rights, prisoners' rights, etc. are even vaguely found in the Constitution, but that hasn't stopped nine persons from inventing them. The media came in for criticism because of its hostility to Catholicism and for its morally offensive fare, problems that continue to plague us.

The last article that Father Blum wrote was in March, 1990. Entitled, "My Hope for the Future...and a Fond Farewell," Father Blum announced his retirement shortly before he died. Here is how he ended his piece:

"I look to a future in which Catholic League membership recruitment efforts will meet with more than the meager response garnered in the past. I look to a future in which the

League will grow in terms of staff; in which more men and women, on fire for the cause of Christ, will be able to find a sense of fulfillment and security in employment with the Catholic League. I look forward to a future in which the Catholic League, supported by the Catholic laity of the United States, will impact more strongly on the ideas of society. And a I look forward to a future in which the Catholic League can more forcefully meet whatever challenges face our most precious freedom: religious freedom."

His final words were, "And that freedom is attainable because of you, the activist Catholics who comprise the Catholic League's membership." That says it all.

I hope you can be with us to celebrate our Silver Anniversary. I have no doubt that Father Blum's spirit will be with us.