

Want to a Know Dirty Little Secret?

Well, some of New York did, and some most definitely did not. From the day the first TV news story on the then-upcoming subway ads ran, the Catholic League has been besieged by phone calls, both pro and con. We have been called “church mongers,” “liars,” and “murderers,” as well as ignorant and irresponsible. Callers have accused us of misleading the public, contributing to the spread of teenage pregnancy, AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, and being willfully harmful to society in general, and youth in particular.

Some have said we plotted the ad to coincide with the Gay Games IV and the Stonewall 25 “celebration.” Ironically, when we contacted the MTA, we were *given* the month of June. It has turned out to be a most opportune time. With the arrival of an estimated 10,000 international gay, lesbian and bisexual athletes and fans, what better time to provide a different point of view.

One group, the Youth Education League of Act-Up, has taken the liberty of sharing their side of the issue through illegal means by plastering handbills on top of the Catholic League ads. Their message reads: “It’s no secret that the Catholic League would sooner see you die than use a condom. Fact: the Federal Centers for Disease Control have concluded that condoms are highly efficient in preventing H.I.V. infection. Use a condom every time.”

On the flip side, we have received tremendous support and encouragement from Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Supporters are thrilled to have another voice entering the “safe sex” discussion in New York City and beyond. Numerous people have called to show their support and ask how they can further back our efforts. And if support from the “man on the

street" is not enough, we have garnered significant scientific backing.

As calls come in questioning our ad (primarily the statement "Condoms Don't Save Lives."), we are able to offer quotes from former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, Dr. William Redfield, chief of retro-viral research at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research and Dr. William Bergman of the World Medical Health Foundation, among others. We also offer statistics (a failure rate for condoms of 18-54%) provided us by the Centers for Disease Control, the same organization often quoted by such groups as Planned Parenthood and Gay Men's Health Crisis. (A much stronger argument, on any topic, can be made when one uses the same source, and, in fact, the same statistics as the opposition.)

The extent to which the subway ad has opened up an alternative discussion on "safe sex" can be measured by the way in which the Catholic League has become the source information on the safety and effectiveness of condoms. We have provided material for the media, classrooms, clergy, medical personnel and many others who have contacted us seeking information to fight the "condoms are the answer to everything" mentality. Even *Consumer Reports* contacted us for information about condom effectiveness.

Unfortunately, many of those contacting us weren't really calling for information. They called to argue. When presented with statistics dealing with the ineffectiveness of condoms (facts which when related to other real-life situations would make you think more than twice about taking a taxi or riding in an airplane with the same failure rates), most could only come back with "but if one life is saved." Obviously, that one life is worth saving, but here is where most people reading the ad missed the *whole* message: nothing, save total restraint – *abstinence* – is 100% safe in preventing unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS. Why can't this be an acceptable alternative when educating people about

sex and their bodies?

It seems the Catholic League does not even merit basic constitutional rights in trying to share this message. When the ad was first announced, New York City Council member Tom Duane, a homosexual activist with HIV, threatened to have the ad banned. Soon after the ad was posted, we received several phone calls from homosexual groups vowing to take down every poster they found. We even received a poster with a rebuttal scrawled across it in the mail. This HIV gay man tells us that "you (the League) are, of course, free to express your beliefs and opinions," but apparently we are not, if our posters are being taken down, destroyed, marred by graffiti and covered by handbills.

Following the attack by the Act Up group, the Catholic League issued a press release condemning the campaign of defacement. The League's statement was picked up by New York *Newsday*. Having lodged several earlier complaints about ads being defaced or torn down, Gannett Outdoor, the company responsible for the sale and maintenance of ad space on the MTA subways, agreed to begin a clean-up and replacement of our posters.

Over the past several months, the staff of the Catholic League has spoken with many people – those "thrilled" and those "outraged." No phone call has so convinced me of the urgency to get out our message, and the message of countless other Catholics and like-minded supporters, than the one I received from a man who called after he witnessed a group of teenagers on the subway reading our ad. After what seemed like an excessively long period of time spent looking at the ad, one of the teenagers asked one of the others what the word "restraint" meant. Incredulously, the man waited to see if they were joking before he volunteered the explanation. The entire group of young people could not come up with a collective understanding of what the word or the message meant. If this is even the least bit representative of the

mind of American youth today, can we realistically expect them to read, comprehend and follow the litany of guidelines supplied by the CDC and others for proper condom use? Teaching them what restraint means would be so much easier – and effective.

-Karen Lynn Krugh