

WASHBURN UNIVERSITY OKAYS CATHOLIC BASHING

A controversial sculpture that depicts a Catholic bishop wearing a hat that resembles a phallic symbol was chosen for display by some faculty members and students at Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas. The exhibit also featured an offensive inscription mocking the confessional.

Printed below is Catholic League president Dr. William A. Donohue's letter of October 2 to Washburn University president Dr. Jerry B. Farley:

On March 14, 1998, you were cited in the Topeka Capital-Journal as approving the unanimous decision of the student-faculty board that reprimanded Ryan Steiner for insulting some students. Steiner, then editor of the Washburn student newspaper, made disparaging remarks about nontraditional students and called another student a "wack-o" and a "loser." You were quoted as branding Steiner's remarks "insensitive," and that is why you approved the resolution that accused him of engaging in "unethical and unprofessional conduct."

As someone who spent 20 years teaching—16 of them in higher education—I believe it took great courage on your part to denounce Steiner's behavior. But I am perplexed as to why you have suddenly turned on a dime when it comes to anti-Catholicism: the official position of the university towards the offensive exhibit by Jerry Boyle, "Holier Than Thou," is without condemnation. Yet it was professors and students on the Washburn Campus Beautification Committee who chose to insult Catholics by selecting the Boyle sculpture for campus display.

Any fair-minded observer would conclude that Steiner's offense pales next to the Beautification Committee's decision to honor

Boyle. So please explain to me why Steiner's foray in bad taste resulted in his being placed on probation—with the explicit threat of dismissal hanging over his head—while those who sanction Catholic bashing are treated as mere agents of free speech?

The reply we got was unsatisfactory. David Monical, Executive Director of Governmental and University Relations, gave us the old “No one involved...intended for any viewers to experience pain or hurt.”

The good news is that because of all the media coverage the issue engendered, it did not die.

On October 15, the Washburn University Board of Regents held one its scheduled two-hour meetings. Fully 75 percent of the meeting was devoted to this subject, but when no resolution could be met, they tabled it.

We are happy that Archbishop James Keleher of the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas got involved. Catholic students on the campus, as well as area Catholics also made their voices heard. This is the kind of response that must be forthcoming if incidents like this are to be avoided in the future.