

We've Only Just Begun

We have rolled into 1995 with a string of victories. Dr. Elders is gone, Bameys department store has been chastened, nativity scenes have appeared on public grounds and the Madonna and Child stamp series has been saved. The Catholic League was involved in all of these victories, sometimes in communion with others, and sometimes strictly on our own.

Dr. Joycelyn Elders is one for the books. The very first news release I issued when I took over as president of the Catholic League in July 1993 was in opposition to the nomination of Dr. Elders as Surgeon General. On August 2, 1993, I was both stunned and delighted to read that a *Washington Post* editorial agreed with us that Dr. Elders was an anti-Catholic bigot. Throughout the month of August, we pressed hard to stop her nomination: we held a press conference at the National Press Club and wrote to all the members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, but we ultimately fell short of our objective. What we did not do, however, was give up. We continued to criticize Dr. Elders whenever she made an irresponsible statement, which, unfortunately, was all too often.

There are those who defended Dr. Elders, even when she made anti-Catholic remarks. For instance, I was recently asked on TV why I thought her comment about "a celibate, male-dominated Church" could be seen as anti-Catholic. My reply was straightforward: if I said that the National Organization for Women was "a lesbian dominated institution," no one would mistake that comment for being a purely descriptive tag. That the phrase was meant as a pejorative would be obvious to everyone.

Our victory against Barneys New York was a solo win. It is by now evident that Barneys has a history of placing offensive displays in its windows, even to the point of bragging about them. But this time the fat cats got burned. New Yorkers of

every religion joined us in condemning Bameys for sporting its blasphemy in public. Indeed, people never stopped calling our office, praising us for what we did and asking to join the League. It is heartening to know that our work is touching a chord all over the place, and that what was seen as chic just yesterday is now being seen as crude.

I can understand people making mistakes, I make them all the time. But I cannot tolerate intellectual dishonesty. If people want to send a message to Catholics that they hate us, they should say so openly. But they should not do as the cowards at Barneys did and lie. Why do they bother to say that the display was not meant to be offensive when obviously it was? Why do they bother to say that Barneys can pass no judgment on whether to accept or reject art work in its storefront window when judgment calls are made on whether to accept or reject every necktie and handkerchief that they see? Why don't they just say that the reason they promote vulgar nativity sets is the same reason why they previously hung condoms from a Christmas tree, namely, for the purpose of sticking it to those whom they loathe?

I don't know about where you live, but in New York this past December just about everywhere I went I saw a menorah on public grounds. In parks, train stations, schools – everywhere there were menorahs. That's fine by me, but where were the nativity scenes? We pressed our case in many places and won, but regrettably we saw little interest on the part of Christians to demand their equal rights. Why didn't they object when the authorities said that the display of a Christmas tree was sufficient to satisfy Christians? According to the Supreme Court in *Allegheny County v. ACLU, Greater Pittsburgh*, the Christmas tree is not a religious symbol, yet the Catholic League had to show this ruling to public libraries and schools on Long Island before justice was done.

Next year we'll be ready. We will raise money for the display of a huge nativity scene to be placed in Central Park.

Unfortunately, Catholics and Protestants have greeted the removal of Christian sacred symbols from public life with a degree of insouciance that would never be found in the Jewish community. It is a tribute to Jews that they rally to secure their heritage. Would that we do the same.

The decision by the U.S. Post Office to ban the popular Madonna and Child stamp infuriated me. We contacted every Republican and Democrat in Washington who sat on any committee or subcommittee dealing with the Post Office and expressed our concerns. We hit the media stating our case with vigor, and when we did so we were told that we were virtually alone in leading the fight to restore the stamp. Where were our sister organizations in all this? It is still a mystery, but in any event, we can take credit for pressuring President Clinton to do the right thing in rescinding this incredible decision of the Postal Service Advisory Board.

These victories, and others reported in this issue of *Catalyst*, have left us emboldened in a way we never were before. We look for more successes in 1995. As the song says, "we've only just begun."