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Billy the bully is bad for the church

Joe Feuerherd | May. 11, 2010

Catholic League president Bill Donohue makes a point on CNN.

Commentary

It?s good to be William Donohue, president of the ?Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights.? For one, there?s money in fighting bigotry: Donohue earned $372,501 in salary and deferred compensation in 2008, according to the group?s most recent IRS disclosure report.

Plus, no heavy lifting. Produce serious research on the impact of antichurch prejudice on the lives of the nation?s 70 million Catholics? No way. Despite assets exceeding $22 million, no one could fairly accuse the Catholic League of engaging in such laborious, potentially useful, but expensive endeavors.

A campaign to educate Americans on Catholic contributions to the country and the culture? Get serious. The league?s efforts, such as they are, remain focused largely on highlighting intrachurch squabbles, silliness such as ?the war on Christmas,? and defending the indefensible.

Hopping by cab from your office on Manhattan?s Seventh Avenue to midtown network and cable news studios to obnoxiously opine on the latest church controversy seems to be the toughest aspect of the job.

But the best part of being president of the Catholic League is you can say almost anything, impugn nearly anyone, make the most outlandish public statements, and you?re never held accountable.

?Hollywood is controlled by secular Jews who hate Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular,? Donohue declared in 2004. Fr. Charles Coughlin, the 1930s-era radio priest, could not have said it better.

In 1997, journalists Jason Berry and Gerald Renner broke the story of Fr. Marcial Maciel?s long-standing rape and abuse of young Legion of Christ seminarians. ?Several [of the seminarians, including one who was a 12-year-old at the time Maciel abused him] said Maciel told them he had permission from Pope Pius XII to seek them out sexually for relief,? the two wrote in the *Hartford Courant*.

Donohue offered this belligerent non sequitur in response: ?To think any priest would tell some other priest [sic]

that the pope gave him the thumbs up to have sex with another priest -- all for the purpose of relieving the poor fellow of some malady -- is the kind of balderdash that wouldn?t convince the most unscrupulous editor at any of the weekly tabloids.?

There?s more.

In 2004, *NCR* revealed that the chairman of the Republican National Committee?s ?Catholic Outreach? effort, when he was working as a philosophy professor at New York?s Fordham University, invited a vulnerable 18-year-old freshman (she grew up in foster care and could not legally drink alcohol in New York) for an Ash Wednesday-eve night of carousing that resulted in an booze-driven exchange of sexual favors. The poor professor, explained Donohue, fell victim to a ?drunken female he met [sic] in a bar.?

And now, Billy the Bully has solved the clergy sex abuse crisis.

In repeated recent public forums, Donohue says that since ?most? or ?the vast majority? of the abuse involved post-pubescent males, then the cause of the crisis is gay priests.

Donohue?s argument is baloney.

According to the 2004 study by the John Jay School of Criminal Justice commissioned by the U.S. bishops, nearly half of the cases of abuse by clergy in the United States involve victims ages 12 or younger -- and about 20 percent of the victims were girls. Add 13- and 14-year-olds to the mix and 73.4 percent of the clergy molesters and rapists are accounted for.

Bottom line: Nearly half of the victims were sixth-graders or younger, while three-quarters were junior high age or younger. These victims, barks Donohue, are not ?kids.?

Meanwhile, Donohue keeps some strange company. According to the league?s Web site, Donohue is a member of the board of advisors of Catholic Citizens of Illinois, a group whose founder and chairman, Tom Roeser, ?has taken in recent years to writing essays that are filled with factual errors and misrepresentations about events in the archdiocese of Chicago,? according to Cardinal Francis George. ?At times when the pope or the bishops? teachings or activities do not conform in every detail to his political convictions, he descends to hate-mongering,? George wrote in a March 2010 letter to board members.

Surely, the condemnations and statements of contempt that fly off the league?s Web site faster than a Jonathan Broxton fastball reaches home plate have been issued against Roeser. Oops, apparently not. Lesson: Right-wing attacks on the church and its leaders get a pass from the ?Catholic League.?

Years ago, in her beautifully crafted memoir, *Private Faces/Public Places*, Abigail McCarthy, wife of Minnesota Sen. Eugene McCarthy, wrote that their namesake senator, anticommunist demagogue Joe McCarthy, had a point: There were communist spies working in the government who aimed to bring harm to the United States. But Joe McCarthy?s guilt-by-association tactics, his over-the-top rhetoric and his clownish behavior, wrote Abigail, were so irresponsible that they actually harmed those who were serious about U.S. security. How can the threat be serious if the messenger is such a fool?

Donohue, too, has a point: Anti-Catholicism exists. It is real, though far more nuanced than in the days of ?No Irish Need Apply.? Instead, as *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof noted this month, ?There is often a liberal and secular snobbishness toward the church as a whole -- and that is unfair.?

The Catholic community?s response to this frequently subtle bigotry is a buffoonish bully, a carnival barker posing as a defender of the faith. Such behavior might make for good television (which prefers heat to light) but

it does nothing to help the church. In fact, it does considerable harm because it plays to the worst stereotypes of triumphalism, homophobia, misogyny and intolerance the church long since abandoned.

But it?s good work if you can get it.

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Bill Donohue writes back: Catholic League president responds to NCR column [1]

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