

Watchdog group

Continued from page 1

In the process, League officials have regularly made use of such charges as "Catholic bashing," "anti-Catholic bias," and "bigotry."

"We take a combative approach," acknowledged William A. Donohue, the League's president since 1993, in a telephone interview from the League's New York headquarters. "I like to regard us as 'responsibly aggressive.'"

The need for that aggressiveness became clear to Donohue shortly after he became the League's president.

"I knew there was a need," Donohue said. "I just didn't know it was that voluminous."

Indeed, the League this year published its "1994 Report of Anti-Catholicism," citing more than 200 instances of anti-Catholic activities and editorial cartoons.

And the report contains only the tip of the iceberg, according to Karen Krugh, the League's executive assistant and the report's compiler.

"What you see is the edited version," Krugh said. "There were things we couldn't verify and so many incidents that we kept only the strongest."

Beyond countering anti-Catholicism, the League is also attempting to alert

Catholics that bias does exist, Donohue said.

"We're trying to wake up Catholics," he said. "If the church is attacked, if your religion is attacked, it's an attack on you."

As part of its efforts to alert people, the League has been running direct-mail campaigns to recruit new members. Those efforts, coupled with the League's high public profile over the last few years, have resulted in membership growing from approximately 27,000 in 1993 to more than 200,000 today.

Meanwhile, in addition to a regional office in Washington, D.C., chapters in New York City, Long Island, Philadelphia and Boston have been joined by others in southern Florida, San Diego, El Paso and Atlanta.

"Catholics are finally becoming aware of Catholic bashing," observed C. Joseph Doyle, the League's director of operations. "Catholics are beginning to realize that they have rights like everyone else in society, and that other groups would not put up with the kinds of attacks being made on the church."

"Catholic people are really getting annoyed with people making fun of the Catholic Church," argued Bernadette Brady, who, in July, became the League's vice president after working for the New York archdiocese for 19 years. "We're getting mail and clippings from all over."

Brady estimated that her office alone receives 20 to 30 pieces of mail each day containing reports of anti-Catholicism in print or on radio and television.

The nature of anti-Catholicism has changed, making it sometimes hard to detect at first — and this has prevented some Catholics from realizing how extensive it really is, Donohue said.

Up until the time of President John F. Kennedy's 1960 campaign, anti-Catholicism was open and directed against both individuals and the institutional church, Donohue noted. Although that kind of bigotry still exists, he said, current types of anti-Catholicism are more subtle.

"There are things said (about Catholics) in a very cavalier way that would not be said about other people," Donohue explained.

He cited, for example, a review of singer/songwriter Alanis Morissette in the Aug. 7, 1995 issue of *Newsweek* magazine. After pointing out that Morissette uses off-color, suggestive lyrics, the reviewer, Jeff Giles, writes: "She grew up in Ottawa — her teacher parents fled Hungary during the 1956 revolution — and was sent to Catholic schools. (Which may explain the blue lyrics.)"

"Would they have made the comment, 'It's because she attended the Yeshiva?'" Donohue asked. "Of course not, because it's not politically correct."

A significant portion of Catholic bashing is being carried out by the cultural elite, Donohue charged, adding, "We're talking about the people who shape pop culture. It's much more troubling that the elite who are tolerant of other segments of society are much more intolerant of Catholics."

"I'm not suggesting any kind of alarmist position, like the pogroms are around the corner," Donohue cautioned. "But it's not healthy to have the Catholic Church subjected to a relentless assault."

Still, League officials acknowledged they have heard criticism of their efforts from even some quarters within the

church.

Some critics argued that the Disney boycott, for example, actually helped to promote "Priest."

"It wasn't that the controversy caused people to go to the movie," Krugh contended. "We think the controversy was outlined enough that people got the message not to go to the movie. 'Priest' did not do all well financially."

Another complaint about the League is that it seems to go after even seemingly trivial incidents.

Donohue said that he is careful not to go after every incident of anti-Catholicism, only occurrences that are more serious or that are part of ongoing patterns of anti-Catholicism.

"I'm not going to go after 'The Thornbirds' or 'Sister Act,'" he explained. Neither, he observed, is "mean-spirited" in dealing with the church.

Still, he contended, even seemingly insignificant instances of anti-Catholicism can gradually lead to more serious forms of attack.

"You begin to anesthetize the public, including the Catholics," Donohue warned.

The League avoids getting involved in internal church squabbles, Donohue said. He noted, for example, that he dissolved the former Chicago chapter because some members were attacking Chicago Cardinal Joseph L. Bernardin.

Moreover, Donohue reported that the League does not target critics simply because they challenge the church. "Disagree with the Vatican, but do it in a way that is civil, that is decent," he said.

Despite the criticisms, Donohue said the League is not going to stop its activities, nor curb its style. And the growing number of people joining the organization suggests that the organization's efforts are striking a chord.

"This is not just a job to me," Donohue said. "I'm interested in building a movement. I want to galvanize Catholics. I want Catholics to become less tolerant of Catholic bashing."




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