

COLUMNISTS

Lighten up, Rev. Falwell

I know there are many serious issues that should, probably, be the topic of this column. Nationally we've just come through all this impeachment business; there are surely many moral issues that need addressing there. As a diocese, we have endured a long news story about some former members of a parish who apparently have started a new church. But lately I'm all but burned out on serious issues, so I have decided to write about a news story that I'm not going to treat very seriously at all. That story is about Jerry Falwell's *National Liberty Journal* accusing one of the Teletubbies of being a "gay role model" because he carries a purse!

Now I have long suspected that Rev. Falwell and I are probably not reading the same material. I accept that and expect to differ with him on matters of politics and religion — often. But this matter absolutely demands comment.

Sadly, I don't pretend to know much about the Teletubbies. I didn't even know they existed until a few weeks ago when a friend described his little granddaughter watching the pope on television during the St. Louis visit. My friend told me how the little toddler began squealing with delight when she noticed pictures of the pope on television. The family quick-



the
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BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

ly gathered around to watch her, and were understandably thrilled that she showed so much religious sensitivity at so early an age. But as they attended more closely to what she was saying, they realized that she thought the pope was a Teletubby! I laughed at the story when it was told, but I admit that I had to do a little research later to discover what a Teletubby actually was.

I guess the one Rev. Falwell is mad at is named "Tinky Winky." Raising the issue has taken the very purpose and existence of purses to a new level. There are a whole host of philosophical questions that need addressing, at least in my mind. For example, the entire nature of purses comes into question. Apparently carrying a bag of a certain size is extremely gen-

der-specific. I don't remember hearing a similar outcry when women in this culture began carrying briefcases, even though that type of bag had been associated primarily with males for quite a long time. I wonder whether Rev. Falwell might be confusing socially-assigned gender roles with sexual orientation? Just a question.

Still reflecting on purses, I now have questions about those purse-like items that people tie around their waists to carry what would otherwise be toted in their hand-or-shoulder-held purse. To my knowledge, those waist-packs are used by both genders and all sexual-orientations, with few accusations arising concerning their potential for undermining society.

If Rev. Falwell has confused gender roles with sexual orientation, maybe he has also underestimated the influence of clothing manufacturing on gender perception and the relevance of culture in the assignment of gender identity. I hope not, but I'm beginning to suspect it's so.

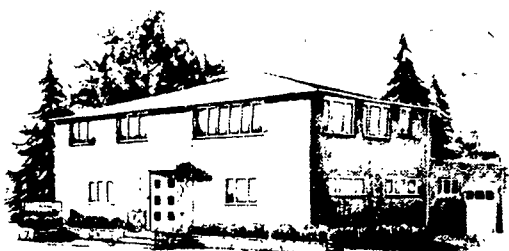
My final thoughts veer from the topic somewhat, but relate in at least a tangential way. They do, however, retain the focus on the superficial that I'm trying to promote in this column. Last weekend I read many newspapers from many cities

about the impeachment and the personalities involved. Several reputable papers included comments about the weight of a few of the "key players" in the scandal. The weights mentioned were those of Ms. Lewinsky and Ms. Tripp. Ms. Tripp has apparently lost some weight, and Ms. Lewinsky has gained some. My own question involved Rep. Hyde and a few portly male lawyers of the president. No newspaper even alluded to the fact that they appeared a little rotund, at least on television. My question is why it is that women's weight becomes a matter of national news attention, deserving comment in reputable news stories by reputable commentators, while men do not endure similar scrutiny and comment. If I had more confidence in Rev. Falwell's analytic ability, I might write to him and ask him whether he thinks this might also be a matter of cultural role assignment, and maybe a little unfair at that. Still, if Teletubbies continue to be as important in the maturation process as he thinks they are, maybe soon we'll all come to value chubbiness and start to think it's actually attractive and healthy!

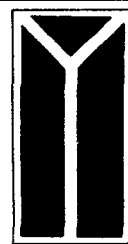
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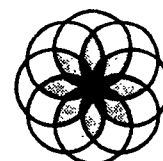
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