

Then This Priest Says. . .

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HOWARD ROSENBERG'S RECENT *L.A. TIMES* COLUMN DETAILING A DUSTUP WITH THE Fox network over a Catholic joke on *The Simpsons* got us thinking: Can many TV writers still be wringing yuks out of the One, True, Holy and Apostolic Church? A trip to the Catholic League for Civil and Religious Rights' Web site was in order. The Catholic League, by the way, is not related to the Catholic Legion of Decency, the organization with an admirable Lex Luthorvs.Superman snap to its name, which helped enforce the Hays Motion Picture Code against sexual or "indecent" content from the 1930s through the 1960s.

The present-day Catholic League objects to plenty of movies and TV shows, not for "indecenty," but for what it sees as anti-Catholic bias. It's an American tradition, says Father Gregory Coiro of the L.A. Archdiocese, with a long and wacky pedigree -- from the Ku Klux Klan (anti-Catholic, along with its other sterling credentials) to Norman Vincent Peale's panic about an impending Kennedy presidency's threat to democracy. (Peale was worried about the philandering, calculating Kennedy's tight links to the Vatican -- talk about positive thinking.)

The League Web site chronicles several years' worth of insults:

Performance art involving Jesus and condoms -- enough said there.

Hassles with the American Civil Liberties Union over Nativity scenes.

Nutty evangelical pamphlets claiming that Catholics worship the Virgin Mary as a goddess.

A catalog that offers a toy called "Nunzilla -- a wind-up doll armed with her missal and ruler" who "makes her way to your desk. Terrifying!" (OffBeat suspects that Nunzilla draws a titter from every Catholic, devout or fallen, who has been at the business end of a yardstick.)

Some of the quips are really offensive, but the real sin is that so many are as musty as the catacombs that hid the early Christians -- and probably first circulated there. (Sample: "The pope was a soccer goalie as a youth -- even as a young man he was trying to keep people from scoring.")

We think the church's recent dealings with Fox mogul Rupert Murdoch are a lot funnier than most of the gags on the League site. Murdoch, who also owns the Los Angeles Dodgers, was awarded a papal knighthood in the Pontifical Order of Saint Gregory the Great last year by Pope John Paul II. It's an honor awarded even to non-Catholics like Murdoch -- and Roy Disney and Bob Hope -- for their good works. And it makes Murdoch's wife, Anna, who is Catholic, a dame -- or, rather, his soon-to-be ex-wife, because the Murdochs split last year. Murdoch has since been linked with a woman less than half his age. It's not exactly a page from *The Lives of the Saints*. But luckily for Murdoch, there are no takebacks on papal knighthoods -- no matter what Bart says next.

--Bobbi Murray

F TROOP

TO ABBY ARNOLD, A MEMBER OF THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST COMMUNITY CHURCH OF Santa Monica, having her 8-year-old son, Kevin, join the Boy Scouts when he comes of age next year would be nothing short of blasphemy.

"It wouldn't be right to put my son in a situation where he could be a victim of discrimination," said Arnold. "Even though it might not affect him on a day-to-day basis, the underlying issue is that he would be considered second-class."

Arnold, like hundreds of other Unitarian parents in California and thousands nationwide, are at odds with the Boy Scouts of America's decision to deny their children the traditional Religion in Life emblem because of their tolerance of homosexuality and religions that don't profess a belief in God. Unitarians, who have 220,000 members in North America and 27 congregations that sponsor Scout troops, accept both atheists and agnostics into the faith as well as bisexuals, gays, lesbians and transgender people.

And they don't take kindly to intolerance, as the Boy Scouts found out when they reviewed the Unitarians' Scout manual, which explained how to get the badge certifying proficiency in the tenets of Unitarianism. The manual contained an in-your-face reference to the Scouts' homophobia and intolerance of those with a broader view of God.

"The Boy Scouts teach them how to get along with other boys and expose them to experiences that they wouldn't otherwise get," said John Hurley, director of information for the Unitarian Universalist Association. "If we thought that this was a completely evil organization, we would not have spent the time and effort over the last few years to try and resolve this dispute."

Ron Schoenmehl, spokesperson for the San Gabriel Valley Scout Council, said religions without some form of a god or higher power are contrary to the Scouts' program. Barring gay scoutmasters is a moral-leadership issue, and one that has been upheld by the California Supreme Court, he added.

The court, in 1998, decided the case of Michael and William Randall, atheists denied Eagle Scout awards when they refused to affirm God's existence, by declaring that the Boy Scouts of America was a private membership organization, not a business, and therefore could set its own admission standards.

"As a private organization, whether we have the right or not is our decision," said Schoenmehl.

The Unitarians attempted to negotiate with the Boy Scouts, agreeing at one point to remove the anti-Scout comments from the manual. But dealings broke down last week when the Boy Scouts found out that the church planned to include the critique in supplementary material presented with the manual.

Lee Barker, senior minister with the Neighborhood Church in Pasadena, thinks that, plain and simple, the Scouts on a national level suffer from homophobia. "The Boy Scouts withdrew our authorization on the grounds that we offered a positive and affirming message about gay and lesbian people," said Barker. "They have been waging this battle against gays over the years, and we were the next ones to receive their retribution."

--Christine Pelisek

SWAG JAG

WHAT DO SCREENWRITERS ANTHONY MINGHELLA (*THE ENGLISH PATIENT*), SHANE BLACK (*Lethal Weapon*) and Don Roos (*The Opposite of Sex*) have in common?

- (a) A cappuccino-colored lace teddy with re-embroidered lace by Michele Conda of FAITH couture
- (b) Estate-bottled, 100 percent blue-agave tequila from Reserva del Duneo with matching hand-blown shot glass
- (c) A ROOTS shoes genuine leather business-card holder

(d) Successful Hollywood careers

(e) All of the above

Of course, (e) is the right answer -- but how, you might ask, did OffBeat become privy to the wet bars and boudoirs of Hollywood's literary lions? Hollywood gift bags, that's how.

OffBeat took a peek inside the oversize canvas bag full of free goodies handed out to panelists (including the writers listed above) at the weekend "Words Into Pictures" conference put on by the Writers Guild Foundation. Gift bags, better known as swag, evoke memories of both the birthday loot bag and the ladies' auxiliary luncheon, where a sweaty handful of tchotchkes is a step up from taking home the centerpiece.

Sometime in the not-so-distant past -- the genesis is murky -- the gift bag crept into society and charity events, then made the short hop to Hollywood, where it reached its zenith. Academy Award presenters and nominees this year received a gift basket valued at \$15,000; mementos included Christofle's Alizes crystal champagne flutes and a TAG Heuer 2000 Exclusive sports watch.

One needn't ask why Hollywood hopefuls might have cherished their free Bodega fudge-truffle bar ("In the finest tradition of the finest European confections") or homeopathic stress mints (Minnie Driver uses 'em). But what about the titans of film, who could as soon build a backyard truffle factory as eat one? Over the years, OffBeat has seen swanky-looking Hollywoodites wrestling publicists for a second or even third swag bag. Various stubble-and-backward-baseball-cap types -- including entertainment reporters, whom the studios lavish with swag -- use their gifts to reward mistresses and maitre d's. Swag has even spawned its own language:

Swag bag: The totes that carry swag are as hot as a Kate Spade bag. Look for the oversize "Words Into Pictures" canvas carryall at Martha's Vineyard and the Hamptons this summer.

Swag hag: This breed prowls industry and charity events, on the hunt for the perfect swag -- and scream if they don't get it. Overheard at the Fire and Ice Ball valet-parking line: "Why did they put in mauve lipstick? The gift bag was much better at the Emmys lunch."

Swag slag: Some gadabouts are so sick of swag, they throw their gift bags away without even looking in them.

Vanity surely has something to do with the rise in gift bags; the aforementioned teddy, cut to fit OffBeat's 7-year-old daughter, would feed the child-bride fantasies of anybody at the conference. But the appetite for swag crosses all boundaries. There's nothing more American than getting something for nothing. Particularly when you've already got it all.

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