

# KEYS TO CATHOLIC CIVIL RIGHTS LEAGUE WORK

BY

**MIKE MASTROMATTEO**

**I**NCLUDED AMONG THE SEVEN SPIRITUAL WORKS of Mercy are the imperatives to instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubtful, bear wrongs patiently and forgive all injuries. If one would presume to add to the works for contemporary times, they might choose advocacy – ensuring that the Catholic Church in general is accorded fair treatment in an environment where diversity, free expression of opinion and the exchange of ideas and commentary hold so much sway.

Taking on the role of advocate and educator is the Toronto-based Catholic Civil Rights League (CCRL), Canada's only lay organization dedicated to counter anti-Catholic defamation and to bring Church teaching to bear on issues of public debate. Founded in 1985, the league occasionally lobbies government and seeks to intervene in court challenges in support of law and policy compatible with a Catholic understanding of human nature and the common good.

Founding members include, among others, (the late) Professor Tom Langan of St. Michael's College, University of Toronto, Basilian priest Father Alphonse De Valk, publisher emeritus of *Catholic Insight* magazine, retired history professor David Dooley, Dr. Keith Cassidy, president of Our Lady Seat of Wisdom Academy in Barry's Bay, ON.

## **PROFESSOR TOM LANGAN**



While the national office is based in Toronto, the CCRL has chapters in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Moncton, New Brunswick, Vancouver and Windsor (Essex) Ontario. It has also established a small presence in Ottawa to lobby Members of Parliament in the nation's capital.

Toronto lawyer Phil Horgan is current president of the league, and Joanne McGarry, former managing editor of the *Catholic Register* and a media savvy professional communicator, serves as executive director. Often Horgan or McGarry are asked to respond to media inquiries about various church or religious issues.

The Canadian group enjoys a loose affiliation with the original US-based Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, which was established in 1973 by Jesuit priest Father Virgil

Blum. The U.S. group was relatively modest in its initial endeavours until 1993 when it was taken over by William Donohue as president.

Although the U.S. group has a longer history, the Canadian counterpart has made great strides in its 27 years of operation. The group celebrated its silver anniversary in 2010. At the time, league president Phil Horgan made note of the core reasons for the group's existence. "There is a strong belief in many quarters that people of faith should not participate in public debate," Horgan said. "We owe a debt to the League's founders for providing a vehicle for countering that sentiment."

Impetus for the Canadian operation came largely in response to the mainstream media's rough treatment of the church for its defense of the sanctity of all human life, especially unborn children. Around 1985, as Canadians argued back and forth about the validity of the former abortion law, a number of editorials and opinion columns in popular media assailed the church for its opposition to abortion and contraception, and for its defense of Pope Paul VI's influential *Humanae Vitae* (On Human Life) encyclical of 1968.

At the time, church and pro-life groups coined the term "slippery slope" to describe the cheapening of human life and traditional morality as evinced by abortion, contraception, euthanasia.

The church's opposition to these "progressive" measures was seen as a form of oppression and as a negation of the diversity/tolerance mantra that was often used to intimidate traditional believers into retreat or silence. As the civil rights league noted, "in name of tolerance, faith was continually pushed into the private realm making 'Catholic' positions on social issues unpalatable. Faith in the public square was no longer welcome."

The decision of the Ontario government in 1985 to provide full public funding to Catholic schools in the province also stirred up some latent anti-Catholic sentiment and called on Catholic groups to defend the church and its important role in education and spiritual formation.

Two of the hallmarks of some media's growing hostility toward all things Catholic occurred about this time. In one instance, an opinion columnist for a major Toronto newspaper described the late Cardinal Emmett Carter, Archbishop of Toronto as "an arrant hypocrite" for his moral support of pro-life, pro-family efforts.

A few years later, CBC broadcaster Michael Enright on a popular radio program, described

the Catholic Church as the "biggest criminal organization since the Mafia."

In the face of these and several other slights and provocations, the time was ripe for a Catholic organization, particularly a lay one, to bring more balance to the media's depiction of the Church.

It was fitting that Tom Langan was involved in the start-up of the CCRL. A long-time professor of philosophy at the University of Toronto, Langan also served as chairman of the Toronto archdiocese's Commission on the Family. Langan, who died May 25, 2012 at age 83, was something of a contemporary evangelist who sought to blot out error and ignorance with revealed truth. "Tom can take credit for bringing thousands closer to Jesus Christ, and for helping many of us to have a deeper and richer knowledge and experience of the faith," Horgan said at the time of Langan's passing. "The words of the Magnificat are appropriate. Tom and Janine truly magnify the greatness and glory of God."

Today the CCRL of Canada numbers about 5000 members, who support the league's work via membership fees and donations. The bulk of the league's work is in monitoring the media for anti-Catholic comment. It is also involved in working with editors, reporters and other communications professionals to ensure a fair hearing for Catholic positions on issues of public debate. "We believe that providing reliable information and constructive dialogue is the best way to ensure that our voice is heard," the CCRL says on its website ([www.ccrl.ca](http://www.ccrl.ca)).

League officials also point out that their work isn't all defensive. It often encourages its supporters to send letters and e-mails, or make telephone calls in support of positive media programs or editorial items. Although the league recognizes that offensive, anti-Catholic bias still shows up in many media outlets, there are still examples of positive programs and publications worthy of support and encouragement.

The league also publishes a regular newsletter and it prepares position papers on topics ranging from the church in the public square, to the obligations of Catholics running for political office. It also publishes statements on issues and developments of concern to Catholic faithful, one of the most recent focusing on Pope Benedict XVI's February, 2013 decision to resign from the papacy. On occasion, the league seeks to intervene in court or human rights tribunal cases, when matters of religious freedom are at stake.

The league holds an annual general meeting, usually in the spring, to report on recent activities and to celebrate its accomplishments. A highlight of the annual meetings is Messenger of the Sacred Heart magazine - September, 2013.



PHIL HORGAN

JOANNE McGARRY



presentation of the Archbishop Adam Exner Award for Catholic Excellence in Public Life to honour outstanding achievement by a layperson in such areas of philanthropy, education, advocacy and the media. Presented since 2004, the award is named for Adam Exner, former archbishop of the Archdiocese of Vancouver. Exner was one of the earliest and most vocal supporters of the league during its formative years.

The most recent Exner award winner is writer and artist Michael O'Brien, author of the 1996 work *Father Elijah* and the more recent *A Father's Tale*. The CCRL website has the complete list of award winners.

It's clear the CCRL has gained in stature and influence since its creation more than 25 years ago. It has evolved from a media watchdog group and apologist, into an organization that helps educate laity on key issues in the public domain. As well, the league helps maintain a Catholic-Christian presence in the exchange of ideas and information in the public square.

As to its effectiveness, league officials believe they are making their mark. "There may not be a great many hard and fast measures to show the league's effectiveness," says executive director Joanne McGarry. "If you went by things like art shows shut down or movies and TV programs challenged, you would find a dozen or so on our website. Given the context of our free speech society, I prefer to think more in terms that we raise issues such as anti-Catholic defamation, anti-religious prejudice and religious freedom in a way that is taken seriously. Certainly the mainstream and religious press both consult us often on these subjects."

There's no doubt the Church can survive its many slings and arrows over the years. But in an age of instant communication and social networked media, it's comforting to know there is an organization that continues to correct error and distortion, and to offer an additional outlet for information about the church's basic teachings, without the sometimes harmful spin of the mainstream media. ♥

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