When Chestnut Hill has protests, it's a 'class' effort

By **DAVID R. BOLDT**

Where else would they tell the Banana Republic how to paint its store or have a prayer vigil for a tree?

I ventured forth onto the streets of Chestnut Hill the other night in search of insights into the causes for the roiling cauldron of controversy that has made my home neighborhood the cynosure of the national media.

Basically, I didn't find out much, though this doesn't prevent me from forming my own theory as to what's going on.

The controversy I refer to is the one over whether the Kay-Bee Toy and Hobby Store should be allowed to open one of its outlets in Chestnut Hill. The battle has been covered extensively in this paper, and this past Wednesday was the featured attraction on the New York Times "National Topics" page.

The article in the Times, headlined "A Chain-Store Invasion of the Proudly Quaint," presented the thesis that racism is at the bottom of the Kay-Bee battle. The concept was captured in a quote from the manager of one of the few black-owned businesses in Chestnut Hill, who said that there was a fear that a mass-market chain store would bring more African Americans into the neighborhood.

Now, no one is going to contend that Chestnut Hill is unsoiled by the stain of racism. Any analysis of census data on housing patterns would show that much of Chestnut Hill is anything but an integrated community. Moreover, a recent ugly little episode involving the black-owned business, a florist, made clear that the social pathology of racism is still virulent.

But I doubt race is a central factor in the Kay-Bee affair. The weekend crowds on the shopping streets of Chestnut Hill are diverse enough to satisfy any affirmative action quota plan. As I sat eating dinner last Thursday at one of the outdoor tables at Roller's, Chestnut Hill's premier bistro, two of the five other tables were occupied by African Americans.

My hypothesis is something even more taboo is at the bottom of the dispute, something so volatile that few dare speak its name: Class.

Think about it: When was the last time you heard anyone in America referred to as being of the *upper* class? You haven't. The upper class has vanished from American society. So has the working class for that matter, but let's stick, for a moment, to the upper end of the social spectrum.

If you walked up to a millionaire, someone whose income placed him well into the top 1 percent of all Americans, and asked him how he would classify himself socially, I would wager that he would say something like, "Well, I guess you would say I'm upper middle-class."

Indeed, being caught talking about class as if it were something that really mattered carries more stigma than, say, being spotted coming out of the pornographic alcove in the local video store.

But I would suggest that the desire of Chestnut Hill residents (and visitors) to define themselves as upper class, albeit in almost clandestine fashion, is at the heart of the protest against Kay-Bee.

Ask yourself this question: Why a battle *over a toy store?* Plenty of other chain stores have long had outlets in Chestnut Hill.

The answer is that one of the key ways in which class is now defined in America is by the way in which you bring up your children, and that includes the type of toys they play with.

Upper-class people are not worried about whether their kids will be able to read when they finish high school; what they worry about is whether the kid will be ready to tackle trigonometry when he or she hits kindergarten.

Consequently, they don't let their kids play with ordinary fun toys that Kay-Bee has in stacks along its aisles. They want "discovery toys" of the sort sold in stores like Zany Brainy and Imaginarium, toys that will enable their children to unlock at least some of the lesser secrets of the universe even as they are being toilet-trained.

The upper-class attitude also includes the idea that parents should tell their children what to do, rather than vice-versa. This admittedly quaint notion came to the fore when letter writers to the Chestnut Hill Local suggested that maybe children in Chestnut Hill might like to have a Kay-Bee toy store in their neighborhood.

The response of the leader of the anti-Kay-Bee protest was withering: "Sure, any 10-year-old would like a Kay-Bee around the corner," she wrote. "But that's why kids that age don't vote and don't have driver's licenses. Their reasoning processes are not fully formed."

At some point in here it should be noted that the Kay-Bee battle is essentially over. Executives of the chain met with the protesters and pronounced themselves delighted to implement many of the suggestions they made.

But to understand the phenomenon that fueled this process — more than 1,000 people signed the petition opposing Kay-Bee's arrival — one has to look at other recent battles that have galvanized the Chestnut Hill community, and how they fit into the context of class.

Another recent event that got the neighborhood up in arms was horror over the intention of Talbot's, a decidedly upscale women's clothing store, to have a sign in front of its new, expanded store that was internally lighted (that is, "backlit").

Too garish, declared many, and the store put up an attractively crafted wooden sign instead.

The episode was reminiscent of the occasion only a few years ago when a group of women actually picketed the Banana Republic store on the occasion of its opening, partially because they were upset about the green-blue shade of paint the store had chosen for its exterior. The color just wasn't right.

The level of excitement generated by these events can only be understood when one recognizes that aesthetics — and, in the narrower sense, dress — have become another key dividing line between social strata.

It comes out in many ways. I have known expectant mothers with upwardly mobile aspirations to express the fervent hope that their child will "have good taste."

And while the crowds of shoppers in Chestnut Hill are diverse in many respects, they all wear the uniform — polo shirts, khaki walking shorts and mocassins (with no socks) for the men; sundresses and sandals for the women.

Or take another seemingly inexplicable event, which occurred a few years ago when it became widely believed that a bank had damaged the roots of a tree in the process of making a bricked walkway. Community leaders seriously proposed that a "prayer vigil" be held for the tree.

Bizarre? Not when you realize the fact that the predominant religion of the upper class is currently nature worship under various names — environmentalism, gardening, etc.

Anyway, whatever Chestnut Hill is doing it seems to be working. I have never seen so many people in its outdoor restaurants in the evening as there are this summer, or strolling along Germantown Avenue on the weekends.

And it is somewhat hypocritical of me to lampoon the place, amusing as some aspects of it are, because I like it.

David R. Boldt is editor of the Editorial Page.

Why all the emphasis on the fallen priests?

By **JOHN M. HAAS**

For The Inquirer / NANCY OHANIAN

Judging by the media coverage, there is a preoccupation today with the sexual misdeeds of Catholic priests.

Granted, it is a great scandal when ministers of religion take advantage of the vulnerable who come to them for help. As the Pope said recently, quoting Jesus, it would be better for them to have a millstone hung about their necks and to be cast into the sea.

Catholics believe that through ordination priests are made to represent Christ in His loving concern and compassion for all in need. It is therefore singularly shocking when priests violate the trust that is placed in them.

But there is no evidence that sexual misconduct is greater among Catholic priests than among the clergy of other churches. Why does the Catholic Church seem to be singled out for such intense media attention and others are not?

There are undoubtedly many reasons, but two seem very likely. First of all, the church is absolutely uncompromising in her sexual teaching which is viewed by many as unspeakably hard and unrealistic. Any sexual activity outside of marriage is considered sinful.

The Catholic Church has never fudged on this teaching. So when one of the official teachers of this "hard doctrine" falls, he seems to be particularly vulnerable prey.

Another reason surely for such media attention (since it is mentioned in virtually every article on the subject) is a Catholic practice which most Americans simply find incomprehensible: celibacy, or the promise never to marry. It should be noted that celibacy is principally not about sex but about giving up the great human goods of marriage and the family for another good — unfettered service to God and the church.

Obviously in giving up marriage, celibate Catholic men and women also give up any thought of sexual activity. In a society as promiscuous as our own, however, such a practice seems beyond belief. Sex is often put forward as essential to self-fulfillment.

In fact, marriage has been so devalued and sexual activity so exalted that people tend to focus on the wrong issue in celibacy: the foresaking of sexual "fulfillment" rather than the giving up of marriage and children.

So why does the Catholic Church insist on celibacy? The least important reasons are the obviously practical ones. Tens of thousands of men and women can thereby place themselves entirely at the service of the church in its mission to the world. Furthermore, this service is provided very economically since there is not the necessity of providing housing and salary and benefits for ministers *and* family.

Also, celibacy provides a tremendous freedom to Catholics to serve anyone — from those living in the most abject poverty to those of tremendous wealth and influence. Priests or sisters never have to hesitate to work among the poor out of concern for their own children's safety, living conditions or educational opportunities.

This is not to deny that married clergy in other Christian churches do not place themselves and their families in difficult situations out of love for those whom they serve. But even as they do so, there are always family considerations that must be taken into account which celibate ministries simply do not have to face.

Another reason for celibacy is to provide witness to the world that people do not have to be slaves to their sexual passions. This is another reason why sexual sins in a celibate are so shocking. But celibacy well lived is an example of true sublimation. Faithful celibates make sublime use of their sexual energies by channeling them into acts of charity toward others and expressions of worship and praise toward God.

But the principal reason for celibacy is to allow certain men and woman to pattern their lives in a unique and radical way after Jesus of Nazareth.

"The birds have their nests and foxes have their lairs but the son of Man has no place to lay his head," says Jesus of Himself. "May it be so with us," say the celibates who give up any opportunity of having a spouse and family so that they can imitate Jesus in His life of complete service to God and to humanity. Married Catholics also imitate Jesus in a life of service to God, but primarily through their families. For the celibate priest, however, the whole world has become his family.

We know that followers of Jesus have not always been faithful. It has been so from the beginning. Jesus was betrayed by one of his closest collaborators, Judas. From the very beginning some priests have not been faithful. But there is no indication from any studies I have ever seen that the institution of celibacy contributes to sexual misconduct.

Indeed, Dr. John Berlin at Johns Hopkins University points out that there is nothing to indicate any higher incidence of pedophilia among Catholic clergy than among the general population.

Since we are dealing with a pathology rather than a moral weakness, as we have learned from the insights of psychiatry, that is to be expected. However, better screening tools must be developed to alert church authorities to candidates to the priesthood who may have this problem. Procedures must be in place to deal firmly and effectively with men who are already ordained and in whom this problem has been discovered.

Yes, there are celibates who break their vows just as there are married men and women who break theirs. The fact that there are unfaithful spouses, however, does not call into question the very institution of celibacy.

In 1992 there were more than 158,000 Catholic men and women in the United States alone who had given up the possibility of having a spouse, home and family (and sexual gratification) so that they could be of complete service to their God and to the world in education, health care, spiritual direction and many other fields.

The Catholic Church has problems with infidelity, yes. But there are few institutions that can boast such unselfishness and generosity on the part of so many. To them we owe a tremendous debt of gratitude.

To those who have fallen in the pursuit of so lofty an ideal — and to those whom they have sinned against — we owe our prayers and support, not abuse. As the Pope said recently: To sensationalize sin and moral weakness is intself a sin.

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Let's hear it for the Bible and its terrific Author

By **MICHAEL KINSLEY**

Will Simon and Schuster never learn? The giant publishing house is already mired in controversy over its publication of *The Last Brother*, in which author Joe McGinniss puts thoughts in Ted Kennedy's head without ever having interviewed him. Now, unapologetically, the same company proposes to publish a book whose author strikes an even more flagrant pose of omniscience.

It's "The Bible." Yes, the Bible, King James version. At long last, God is getting the kind of major publisher's "big book" treatment formerly reserved for literary figures such as Philip Roth or Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf.

A makeshift advance copy (known in the trade as "bound galleys") of "The Bible" arrived the other day, with S&S's signature yellow cover and the customary warning: "Uncorrected and unpublished proofs. Confidential. Do not quote for publication until verified with finished book." (Or what? You'll be turned into a pillar of salt?)

However, it does not violate the author's confidentiality — in case He is still doing some last-minute polishing and searching for *le mot juste* — to reveal that He takes McGinniss-like liberties in reporting events, quotations and thought processes; inserts Himself into the narrative in a style worthy of Hunter Thompson; and scatters sex scenes with the calculation of Jackie Collins.

"The Bible" came with a letter from Alice Mayhew, S&S editorial director, addressed to one of my colleagues, saying, "A few words from you would be helpful in getting more people than ever to do what we've all meant to do and, frankly, what we all need to do — namely, to read the Bible. We would be grateful if you could offer us a quote." How flattering, frankly. The word of God, it seems, needs a few words from a journalist to put it over the top. ("In the beginning were a few words," as the Good Book puts it.)

And what a terrific opportunity. The solicitation of advance words of praise — known as a "blurb" — for use in promoting a book is one of the cherished rituals of publishing, and the source of much petty corruption of the I'll-scratch-your-back-if-you-scratch-mine variety. This, though, is something special. After all, what could be better than having God owe you a favor?

But supplying a suitable blurb for the Bible poses a unique challenge. The old standbys — "Essential reading," or "If you read only one book this year, make it this one," or "His best yet" — seem inadequate somehow.

The S&S edition's own introduction actually describes the Bible as, "so good that I could not put it down" — as well as "compelling stuff" and "the book to which all who wonder, who question, who seek first turn." So those cliches are used up.

The conventional superlatives of book hype take on uncomfortable double meanings in this context. "Awesome"? "Powerful"? "A revelation"? "Hallelujah"? "A literary miracle"? "Absolutely divine"? And the ordinary comparisons fall a bit flat. "If you liked *The Bridges of Madison County*, you'll love The Bible"? "Makes Rush Limbaugh look like Beatrix Potter"? "Don't take John Grisham to the beach this summer — take God"? My best suggestion was, "Belongs in every hotel room in America." Maybe you can do better.

I would love to know how God happened to sign with Simon and Schuster. Was there an auction? How big was the advance? We do know from the Bible itself that this author is a tough bargainer. Once before, when He felt one of His manuscripts was underappreciated, His literary agent staged quite a scene. To quote, without permission, from the uncorrected galleys:

"Moses' anger waxed hot, and he cast the tablets out of his hands, and broke them beneath the mount. And he took the calf which they had made, and burnt it in the fire, and ground it to powder, and strewed it upon the water, and made the children of Israel drink of it." Thus cowed (so to speak), they renegotiated the contract.

Meanwhile, I can hardly wait for the book tour. It will start, naturally, with an appearance on Larry King Live, on some night when Ross Perot is not available. (LK: "So what's it like, really, to be God?" G: "You should know, Larry. No, seriously, Larry, it's great, really great, and I just hope I can give something back to the community.")

He'll take phone calls, of course. (LK: "Davenport, Iowa — Hello." Caller: "Yes, Larry, your show is great and I'd just like to ask your guest to explain this flood, because. . . ." LK "Whoops! Gotta cut you off. Thanks for calling. Next call, Sarajevo. . . .") Then will come book signings in 200 cities — simultaneously.

But, as Alice Mayhew says, what we all need to do, frankly, is to read the Bible. And I'm going to, frankly. Just as soon as I finish *The Last Brother*.

Michael Kinsley is a senior editor of The New Republic, in which this article first appeared.