

CALIFORNIA COURTHOUSE TRIGGERS BIG CONTROVERSY

The Catholic League weighed in quickly and decisively in a raging controversy over an attempt by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) to censor a religious message that is posted in the Riverside County courthouse in Riverside, California.

The ADL's Pacific Southwest regional office has sought to get officials of Riverside County to censor a quote by Theodore Roosevelt that reads, "The true Christian is the true citizen." Those words, which are engraved in gold letters on a mahogany wall in the local courthouse, were to be covered while the court was in session; they were to be uncovered during historical tours. The ADL says the quote should be covered because it could be seen as "a specific endorsement of the Christian faith."

There are two issues at work here. One is whether it can reasonably be maintained that the government is establishing a religion simply by posting a religious message offered by a president of the United States. "If this is the test," declared William Donohue, "then we will have to censor the figure of Moses with the two tablets that sits in the U.S. Supreme Court building." Donohue added that "we will also have to censor the engraved quote of Thomas Jefferson, 'The God who gave us life gave us liberty,' that can be found in the very same Riverside County courthouse that features the Roosevelt remark."

The other issue is freedom of speech. How ironic it is that in the 1970s, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that it was freedom of speech for a man standing in line in a California courthouse to wear a jacket with an obscenity printed on it.

Officials at the ADL's Pacific Southwest regional office said

they did not object to the entire statement by Roosevelt (some 80 words); their problem was that the remark in the courthouse is taken out of context. So we decided to call their bluff.

As soon as this case made the news, Donohue immediately wrote to the ADL, courthouse officials and the judge who heard the case proposing an alternative resolution: the Catholic League will pay for a new engraving, one which includes Roosevelt's entire comment. "It's time someone called the hand of those who harbor an animus against Christianity," Donohue said.

Because a lawyer has now sued the ADL, courthouse officials have decided to take no action until it is adjudicated. But our offers still stands.