

CENSORING RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION OF PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

Catholic League president William Donohue addressed today the news release of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) on the religious expression of presidential candidates:

"The ADL has written to every presidential candidate saying, 'Candidates should feel comfortable explaining their religious convictions to voters.' No one could reasonably disagree with this statement. It goes on to say that 'appealing to voters on the basis of religion is contrary to the American ideal and can be inherently divisive, wrongly suggesting that a candidate's religious beliefs should be a litmus test for public office.' Broadly understood, this is a defensible position. What worries the Catholic League, however, is what prompted the ADL to act in the first place.

"The ADL finds it objectionable that Gov. Howard Dean recently said, 'I'm pretty religious...I pray every day, but I'm from New England so I just keep it to myself.' Was not Dean simply showing how comfortable (or uncomfortable) he is in explaining his religious convictions to voters? The ADL is also bothered by Sen. Joseph Lieberman's remark that while he strongly supports separation of church and state, he emphasizes that the Constitution 'promises freedom of religion, not freedom from religion.' But this is simply a truism. Moreover, it is neither divisive nor suggestive of a litmus test for public office.

"The effect of what the ADL is doing is to create a 'chilling effect' on the free speech rights of presidential candidates. If any candidate is guilty of pandering to the electorate on religion, the voters will take due note of it. And if any

candidate seeks to exploit religion in a way that is truly divisive, the voters will send an unmistakable message at the polls. But short of this—and there is no evidence that any candidate is guilty of such infractions—everyone who runs for public office should be encouraged to express himself as freely as he wants about his religious convictions. To suggest otherwise is contrary to the American ideal.”