

CRÈCHES MAKE COMEBACK

Every December the Catholic League presses its case that crèches should adorn the public square. From public parks to public schools, league activists have succeeded in getting the authorities to recognize that it is unfair to deny the placement of a crèche when space has been provided for menorahs. This past December was no different.

Reports of crèches being placed in public places reached our office from all over the nation. Regrettably, there is still stiff resistance in virtually every part of the country, but progress continues to be made. Perhaps the most prominent victory occurred in New York when the president of the Long Island Rail Road reversed his decision of last year not to allow a crèche in Penn Station. It was due to the work of Long Island chapter president Chuck Mansfield that a crèche was placed in Penn Station in 1996.

In 1995, Long Island Rail Road president Thomas Prendergast wrote to Mansfield explaining that the placement of Christmas tree and a menorah "are typical of public displays representing the two major holidays of the season, Christmas and Hanukkah." He added that "our legal department has advised that our decorations conform to court rulings concerning the First Amendment."

In 1996, Mansfield pressured Prendergast again, only this time the message was different: "We at the Long Island Rail Road," wrote Prendergast, "are very pleased to advise you that a Nativity scene will be on display at Penn Station during the Holiday season."

Mansfield also worked with the Knights of Columbus on this issue in many parts of Long Island, scoring the biggest victory in Westhampton Beach. Mansfield cooperated with John Sullivan, Grand Knight of the local K of C, in getting

permission to put a crèche on the village green.

Yet another victory that Mansfield won was getting the Glen Cove library to put up a nativity scene. He was also instrumental in getting the Jericho Fire District on Long Island to add a crèche to its holiday display and in getting the schools in Garden City to display a nativity scene. Finally, Mansfield persuaded the town of Hempstead to display a crèche on municipal property.

The national office of the league was successful in persuading officials in Rockland County to display a crèche at the Holiday Festival in Clarkstown. League employees also gave needed advice to many callers on how to proceed with this matter, offering to buy crèches if requested.

The national office dealt most extensively with this issue by giving advice to persons who called the office; calls came in from throughout the nation. We also made our case on numerous TV and radio shows.

Gov. Christie Whitman's office of New Jersey was perhaps the most obstinate on this issue. After the governor participated in the menorah lighting ceremonies at the State Capitol, league staffers made many phone calls inquiring about the source of funds used to purchase the menorah. In every case, the governor's office proved to be uncooperative. A letter was sent to her explaining the league's frustration.

The public schools and U.S. Post Office proved to be tough battlegrounds. While some schools did display a crèche, most settled for a Christmas tree instead of a nativity scene. While there is no specific legal case that addresses crèches and menorahs in the schools, there is no legal prohibition that stops principals and superintendents from establishing parity between the two religious symbols.

The abysmal ignorance that public officials show regarding court decisions on this matter is troubling. In some cases,

it's not ignorance, but prejudice against Christians that explains the inertia. Either way, the league will have to fight this war every year until fair treatment is finally secured.