

DEFENDING THE RELIGIOUS RIGHTS OF ALL

Department of Justice publications on Religious Freedom

The Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice recently released its *Report on Enforcement of Laws Protecting Religious Freedom* for the fiscal years 2001-2006. This publication contains useful information regarding protection of your rights in such areas as education, employment, and housing discrimination.

Another Department of Justice publication, *Protecting the Religious Freedom of All: Federal Laws Against Religious Discrimination*, is an invaluable guide to citizens wishing to know the full extent of their rights.

Anyone interested in reading about federal law in these areas should go online and visit <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/religdisc/religionpamp.htm>.

Catalyst readers will soon learn that many of the injustices the Catholic League opposes each year are indeed illegal.

The Department of Justice highlights the following scenarios as being possible violations of federal law.

Education

- A group of students form a Bible club and ask for permission to meet in a classroom before school. While other student-created groups are given meeting space, the Bible club is barred because it is religious.
- A teacher berates a student in front of the class because he does not share the faith of the teacher and the rest of the class, leading to repeated harassment of the student by other children.

Housing

- An apartment complex has a meeting room that is available for residents to reserve for card games, social activities, and similar events. A resident is told that she may not use the room to hold a Bible study with friends.
- A tenant in public housing places a statue of the Virgin Mary on her balcony. Although other tenants are permitted to place similarly sized decorative objects on their balconies, the property manager says that religious items are not allowed in public housing.

Zoning and landmarks

- A small church is denied a permit to operate out of a storefront in a commercial zone, even though non-profit groups including fraternal lodges, a dance studio, and a theater company are permitted in the same zone.
- A town's zoning ordinance requires all houses of worship to obtain a variance in order to locate within its borders. While there are a number of churches already in town, every application for a new house of worship since the ordinance was adopted has been denied.

Penal system

- Catholic prisoners seek space in a prison chapel on Sunday and permission for a volunteer priest to come in to say Mass, but are told that they should attend the nondenominational Christian service run by the prison's Protestant chaplain.

It is reassuring for people of all religious faiths to know that the federal government takes seriously violations of religious liberties such as the ones mentioned above. Americans of all creeds would do well to arm themselves with the information provided in these Department of Justice

religious freedom publications.

Remember, knowledge is power—if you don't know your rights, you won't realize it when you're not getting a fair shake.