

FREEDOM OF RELIGION UNDER FIRE

Every now and then an event occurs that makes me feel very proud to be a Catholic. One such event recently happened while I was waiting to testify before the New York City Council on a bill that protects houses of worship.

As readers of *Catalyst* already know, Catholic churches have come under increasing attack by gay militants, and most especially by the vicious “Act-Up” group. Mass has been interrupted and on some occasions the Host has been desecrated by homosexuals who have spit it on the floor. These Nazi-like tactics never seem to garner the outrage of the press, though there is little doubt that the gentlepersons of the media would be aghast if they learned of similar incidents occurring in a synagogue. Or just consider what the reaction would be if the neo-Storm Troopers interrupted a service by the Reverend Jesse Jackson? It is said that all is fair in love and war. This, rest assured, isn’t love.

On the surface, though, it would seem logical that no one would want to oppose a bill that offered protection for the right to worship. After all, even determined atheists can be expected to respect the constitutional rights of others. But unfortunately, logic and fairness are not in abundant quantities these days.

As is true with any bill, reasonable persons might differ with some of the wording of the legislation. However, those who spoke against the bill did not quibble about any provision of the bill. Instead, they focused most of their attention on whether there was any need for such legislation. Two of those who spoke in opposition offered testimony that was truly astounding.

Laura Murray from the ACLU testified that there was no need for the bill because she had checked with the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith (ADL) and found that there was no record of people busting into houses of worship. She also maintained that to pass such a bill would offer special protection to religion and would therefore be unconstitutional. Finally, she said that the Founders would never counsel acceptance of such a bill. In particular, Ms. Murray cited Thomas Jefferson as one who would have opposed the bill.

During my brief testimony, I tried to set the record straight. To begin with, no one from the ACLU ever checked with the Catholic League to see if we had any evidence that houses of worship had been crashed. The ADL, good as it is in record keeping, is not exactly the only source in town. Second, there is no special protection afforded houses of worship in the bill. All the bill does is to ensure that the First Amendment be applied locally. As for Jefferson, he not only was not the die-hard church and state separatist that the ACLU would have us believe, he was, as I pointed out, the President who awarded \$300 to the Kaskaskia Indians for the purpose of building a Roman Catholic church. That hardly sounds like the work of an ACLU freak.

So why was I so proud to be a Catholic that day? Because of the testimony of Reverend Beatrice Blair, an Episcopal priest at Calvary St. George church in lower Manhattan. Reverend Blair not only defended the need for a bill to protect women in their quest for an abortion, she said there was no need to pass legislation affording houses of worship protection from church-busters.

Incredibly, she also said that her views represented the mainline Protestant churches and the Reform and Conservative Jewish religions.

The good news is that no Catholic made such embarrassing

remarks. None was so inane as to reject a bill that protected freedom of religion. Perhaps that's because Catholics have been the ones victimized by the terrorists. Even so, one might think that a member of the clergy, of any religion, would never want to oppose a bill that simply afforded greater protection for the right to worship. After all, people who have never had any reason to call the fire department support fire departments.

It also says something very sad about those religions that have so collapsed in their moral authority that none of today's religio-terrorists have any reason to target their houses of worship. The Catholic religion, for all its division, remains steadfast in its insistence that its teachings are not subject to trendy referenda. It is reassuring to know that while other religions are fast caving in to secular demands, the Catholic Church is not selling itself to elitist bidders.

The vote on the houses of worship bill was postponed until more hearings can be scheduled. The Catholic League will be there and will provide the incontrovertible evidence that some pundits claim doesn't exist. We'll keep you posted.

—William A. Donohue