

# HOUSE CHAPLAIN POST DEMANDS SCRUTINY

The quest for a new House chaplain began in June, 1999 when an 18-member committee of Republicans and Democrats sifted through almost 50 resumes. After interviewing 17 candidates, and selecting six as semifinalists, the top three names were submitted to House Speaker Dennis Hastert, House Majority Leader Dick Armey and House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt; they were permitted to name any one of the finalists.

Their choice was Rev. Charles Wright, a Presbyterian minister. Rev. Wright placed third in the committee voting, however, the three that made the final selection claims not to have known about this. The committee's first choice was Rev. Timothy J. O'Brien, a Catholic priest and professor at Marquette University. Gephardt, a Democrat, voted for Father O'Brien; the two Republicans, Hastert and Armey, voted for Rev. Wright, citing his superior pastoral experience.

The Catholic League's initial response was to write to every member of the House asking them to reexamine this matter when it comes to him for a vote on January 27. Our concern was as follows:

"When Father Timothy O'Brien was vetoed as House chaplain, the central question left on the table was the reasoning that the House leaders employed when they rejected the overwhelming advice of their colleagues.

"To say that most members of the House would be more comfortable with a Protestant minister than with a Catholic priest—which is precisely what Dennis Hastert and Dick Armey are reported as saying—is to say that Catholic priests need not apply for this post. As Hastert and Armey know, never in the history of the U.S. has there been a Catholic priest

chosen for House chaplain. This raises the question, If not now, when?"

What bothered the league most of all was the line of questions that the Republicans asked of Father O'Brien. Questions that probed whether a Catholic priest's Roman collar might be seen as divisive by some congressmen were inappropriate, we insisted. So were questions that probed whether a single, celibate priest could adequately counsel family members.

After receiving the letter from the Catholic League, Rep. John Dingell called for the full disclosure of all the records relating to the selection of the new House Chaplain; the league publicly supported him in this effort.

A letter from Rep. Dick Armey to William Donohue relieved some of the league's concerns, but still left other questions unanswered.