

LEAGUE ENDORSES RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AMENDMENT

On July 23, Catholic League president William Donohue testified before the Subcommittee on the Constitution of the House Committee on the Judiciary on a proposed amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The Religious Freedom Amendment, which was first sponsored by Rep. Ernest Istook and then revised twice, once by Rep. Henry Hyde and again by Rep. Dick Armey, reads as follows: "In order to secure the right of the people to acknowledge and serve God according to the dictates of conscience, neither the United States nor any State shall deny any person equal access to a benefit, or otherwise discriminate against any person, on account of religious belief, expression or exercise. This amendment does not authorize government to coerce or inhibit religious belief, expression or exercise."

William Donohue explained why the Catholic League is backing the amendment:

"The central reason why the Catholic League is endorsing the Religious Freedom Amendment is quite simple: we believe that in the past few decades a number of court decisions and administrative orders have been passed that are inimical to religious freedom, the result of which has been a diminution of First Amendment guarantees. We do not seek to amend the First Amendment, rather we seek to restore the status quo ante, that is the condition that was outlined by the Framers of the Constitution and was found acceptable by the courts for most of our nation's history. In short, we want our rights back.

"There is nothing in the amendment that would coerce anyone from observing any religion, and that is how it should be. What we are looking for is not special treatment but an end

to the two-class system we have at the moment where secular expression is given preferential treatment over religious expression.”

Donohue submitted a 17 page testimony to the Subcommittee on the Constitution (which was then placed on the Internet). In his oral presentation, he offered several examples of governmental bias against religious expression and was questioned by several members of Henry Hyde’s subcommittee.

Donohue focused on a variety of issues, ranging from the Pentagon to local schools. Though the hearings were dubbed by many in the media as a way to bring prayer back into the schools, Donohue’s testimony was not directed at that issue. Instead, he discussed concrete cases where government has encroached upon religion and where religious speech was treated as second-class speech as compared to secular expression.

It was Donohue’s position that even if the amendment failed, the very fact that the hearings were held sent an important signal to those in Washington.