

# League Wins On Religious Stamps

On November 17, 1994, the U.S. Postal Service announced that beginning in 1995 there would be no more printing of the Christmas stamp series reproducing paintings of the Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus. Upon hearing this news, the Catholic League moved quickly to state its objections. We issued a news release and wrote to every Congressman and Senator with oversight responsibilities governing the affairs of the Postal Service. The League is grateful that President Clinton intervened in this matter and had the decision overturned without delay.

The recommendation to ban religious stamps was first made by the Citizens Stamp Advisory Committee. The committee is headed by a college professor and is staffed by a motley crew of designers, sports commentators and actors, people whose expertise is not generally associated with being on a government review panel. But their expertise was apparently sufficient to persuade Azcezaly S. Jaffer, the Postal Services top stamp official. Jaffer accepted the reasoning of the advisory panel stating that, "We're moving away from being denominational to being nondenominational."

There were many things about this decision that troubled the Catholic League. First, of course, was the decision itself. Our news release spoke to this aspect of the case, stating that, "The decision to ban religious stamps constitutes censorship, pure and simple. It also represents a meanness of spirit and contempt for the mores of American society. The same government that authorizes public monies for an artist to show his hatred of Christianity by submerging a crucifix in a jar of urine now thinks it unconstitutional to allow religious stamps. Evidently the only religious displays that the federal government finds acceptable these days are those that have

been sufficiently blasphemed.”

Another troubling aspect was that the decision was unnecessary: there is absolutely nothing in the First Amendment that warrants censorship of religious stamps. The Madonna and Child stamp has been issued for 28 years and never has there been any legal problem. Aside from occasional complaints registered by atheistic organizations like Americans United for Separation of Church and State, no one has challenged the constitutionality of the stamp, not even the ACLU.

That the decision was purely a top-down ruling is most upsetting. The advisory committee was under no pressure by any segment of the public to remove the stamp, rather the members acted wholly on their own. They simply took it upon themselves to reorder a popular American tradition, using the heavy hand of government to inculcate its politics. This is political correctness of the worst sort.

Finally the way in which the decision was rendered was also cause for concern. At the November 17 press conference, mention was made of the 120 new stamps for 1995, but nothing was said about the cancellation of the Madonna and Child series. News about the religious stamp was released to reporters after the press conference had concluded, and apparently not every reporter heard it, thus accounting for the slight coverage that it initially received. An announcement of this magnitude surely should have been integral to the press conference. That it wasn't raises serious ethical questions. And put together with the fact that the decision was not made in response to public outcry, the result is nothing less than an attempt by unelected elites to do an end run around American public opinion, refashioning the culture to fit their politics.

The Catholic League is proud to have been singled out by many in the media for being the first organization in the nation to

register its criticisms of the advisory committee's decision. Unfortunately, we did not receive much support from other organizations in this matter. But that only underscores the need for the Catholic League.