

PRAYER IN SCHOOL ISSUE HEATS UP AGAIN

Two major developments regarding the perennial issue of prayer in the schools occurred today. The U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear a challenge to a state law in Virginia requiring a minute of silence in the schools. On the legislative front, Rep. Ernest Istook of Oklahoma announced that he plans to reintroduce a constitutional amendment that would allow religious expression, including prayer, to take place on public property without interference by the authorities.

Catholic League president William Donohue addressed this issue today:

"Since September 11 there has been a spiritual reawakening in America that is as palpable as it was predictable. That this development has touched the issue of prayer in the schools is understandable. What the U.S. Supreme Court did today was to give due recognition to the voice of the people's representatives in Virginia. As such, it seems to say that this is not the time for nine justices of the court to decide admittedly controversial issues. The Catholic League commends the high court for its restraint.

"Rep. Istook's constitutional amendment would bar state sponsorship of religion and would also prohibit preferential treatment of one religion over the other. This would simply affirm the status quo. But what it would also do is protect the right of citizens, including students, to voluntarily exercise religious speech on public property.

"There can be honest disagreement over whether a constitutional amendment is the proper vehicle of redress for legal disputes. What is important, however, is that a democratic dialogue on this critical subject go forward, and for that we can thank Rep. Istook for courageously broaching it. Those opposed to the Istook amendment should not take this opportunity to further demagogue the issue; rather they should dispassionately seek to persuade us why censoring religious speech is the American way."