

RELIGIOUS RIGHTS IN WORKPLACE LOOMS IN MASSACHUSETTS

A bill that would secure protection for workers who desire to observe religious holidays without penalty has passed the Senate in Massachusetts and has now passed muster with the Supreme Judicial Court. The legislation awaits passage in the House; Governor Weld has said that he will sign the bill.

In February 1995, the Catholic League submitted an amicus brief in the case of *Pielech and Reed v. Massasoit Greyhound, Inc.* It did so because Kathleen Pielech and Patricia Reed were fired from their job at Raynham-Paunton Greyhound Park when they failed to show for work on Christmas day, 1992.

When the case was brought before the Supreme Judicial Court in 1995, it struck down the existing law that protected religious rights in the workplace as unconstitutional. But when a new law was passed extending religious rights to those not affiliated with an organized church or sect (a sincerely held belief was sufficient to grant protection), the Supreme Judicial Court, on November 27, 1996, upheld that law's constitutionality.

Catholic League president William Donohue phrased the league's position as follows:

"What happened to Kathleen Pielech and Patricia Reed was an outrage. Religious liberty means precious little if those who seek to exercise it are penalized for doing so. Holy days, in any world religion, are meant to be observed by the faithful, and this is not possible if workers are punished for doing so.

"It is regrettable that the previous law, which existed in Massachusetts for 23 years, was not held constitutional in the first place. There is a danger that the new law could be exploited by those not genuinely affiliated with any socially

recognized religion, but that risk is worth taking if it means that most workers in Massachusetts will again be able to celebrate their religious holidays without fear of reprisal.

“Over the past few months, the Catholic League has contacted the Massachusetts Governor, Lt. Governor, Attorney General, House Speaker and Senate President urging them to restore religious liberty in the workplace. We are pleased with their response and await speedy justice in the House.”

The Catholic League is the nation’s largest Catholic civil rights organization. It defends individual Catholics and the institutional Church from defamation and discrimination.