

ROCKFORD POLS NIX CHURCH DEMOLITION

Yesterday, the Catholic League issued a news release regarding the proposed demolition of St. Mary's Oratory, the second oldest church in Rockford, Illinois. Winnebago County officials were allegedly considering a plan to replace the church with a new county jail. But now public officials have pledged not to destroy the church. Commenting on the latest development is Catholic League president William Donohue:

"We are delighted that the Winnebago County Board has said it will not tear down St. Mary's Oratory. Yesterday, I wrote to every member of the board expressing our concerns. Immediately, I heard from John M. Sweeney, Mary Ann Aiello, Bob Kinnison and John Terranova; all opposed any effort to disturb the church. Later in the day I received a statement from County Board Chairman Kris Cohn, States Attorney Paul A. Logli and Sheriff Richard Meyers that said there were 'no plans to buy and/or destroy' St. Mary's; the board added that Allen Chapel AME would be similarly protected.

"This is a textbook example of democracy in action. The Catholic League is contacted by Scott P. Richert of the Rockford Institute; I issue a news release and e-mail every member of the county board; Chris Bowman of WNTA interviews me; Rockford Bishop Thomas Doran joins the interview; and county officials scratch the plan.

"We are grateful to all the leaders in the Rockford community who contributed to this happy ending."

OFFICIALS IN ROCKFORD, ILLINOIS TARGET CHURCH

Over Labor Day weekend, some members of the Winnebago County Board designed a plan to tear down a Catholic Church, St. Mary's Oratory, and replace it with a new county jail. The church, which is the second oldest in Rockford, is the only Catholic church that services downtown residents. A vote by the Public Safety Committee is scheduled for today; tomorrow the full board will vote.

Catholic League president William Donohue spoke to this issue today:

"We are contacting every member of the Winnebago County Board urging them to scratch this hastily drawn plan today. St. Mary's is not just another church: built in 1885, it was fully restored as St. Mary's Shrine in 1997 by Bishop Thomas Doran and the Institute of Christ the King. Parishioners responded by donating a quarter-million dollars to have it restored. Furthermore, attendance has exploded as hundreds of young people and their families make their way to the church on weekends; during the week the church is frequented by local government workers. To top it off, St. Mary's is the only church in the nation to offer the Latin Mass exclusively twice daily.

"Building a new county jail is important, but surely it can be done without demolishing a church of this significance. St. Mary's sports a vibrant community and is led by one of America's premier bishops. In short, it merits a special place in the Rockford community.

"To bulldoze St. Mary's so that local thugs can have a new home is more than insensitive—it's insane. Because of the uniqueness of this church, Catholics from all over America

will keep a close eye on how county officials react.”

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS OPEN AMIDST CONTROVERSIES

Catholic schools are opening to a range of controversies this year. For example, a lesbian couple in Eugene, Oregon has made a formal complaint to the Eugene Human Rights Commission charging that O’Hara Catholic School has refused admission to their 4-year-old daughter because of their sexual orientation.

Meanwhile, Regina High School in the Cleveland area is being pressed by the Council on American Islamic Relations to reconsider its dress code: the school decided not to allow a Muslim student who wears the Muslim head scarf (the hijab) to return to school.

Catholic League president William Donohue offered the following remarks today:

“Both of these incidents involve the right of Catholic educators to exercise their autonomy. It does not matter that some object to their decisions: what matters is their constitutionally protected right to make decisions that accord with Catholic teachings.

“To ask a governmental agency to intervene in the internal affairs of Catholic schools shows utter contempt for the principle of separation of church and state. Similarly, the spectacle of having a Muslim civil rights organization lobby a Catholic school to accommodate Islamic strictures is as preposterous as having the Catholic League pressure Islamic schools to accommodate the dietary requirements of Catholic

students during Lent.

“If diversity means anything, it means that one size does not fit all. This is especially true when applied to religious institutions.”