

BILL TARGETS CHURCH VANDALS

On February 10, New York State Senator Jeffrey D. Klein introduced legislation that would sharply increase the penalties for vandalizing a house of worship. The bill also covers the destruction or theft of religious symbols that occur on such grounds.

We supported the legislation and released the following statement to the press:

“Every year, nativity scenes, menorahs and other religious symbols are ransacked, and too often the offenders are treated as if they vandalized an ice cream parlor. Fortunately, State Senator Jeffrey D. Klein wants to increase the penalties associated with the trashing of churches, synagogues, mosques and other houses of worship. His bill is one that every lawmaker in Albany should support, and we look forward to its speedy implementation.

“The Catholic League is proud of what Senator Klein is doing, and we ask all Catholics to rally behind him. The time has come to clamp down on vandals who seek to destroy our First Amendment right to worship as we see fit.”

SCHOOL CHOICE: MIXED RESULTS IN FLORIDA AND NEW YORK

January was a crucial month for those interested in the subject of school choice. Our side fared poorly in Florida, but showed promise in New York. The difference between the two was evident: in Florida, the courts rendered the decision, and

in New York, the Attorney General and presumptive candidate for governor, Eliot Spitzer, announced his position.

Since 1999, Florida Governor Jeb Bush has been heralding the Opportunity Scholarship Program. Designed to give the parents of schoolchildren trapped in failing schools an option—via a voucher program—whereby they could elect to send their kids to another school (public, private or parochial), the program has been the subject of intense scrutiny nationwide. But now the program will die at the end of this school year: the Florida Supreme Court voted 5-2 to kill the initiative.

Some of those opposed to the voucher program maintained that it was unfair to allow failing public schools to die. Instead, they argued that such schools should receive more money, not less. But this is exactly what happened: once a public school was deemed a failure, it became the recipient of more funding.

The Florida experiment also demonstrated that the failing schools improved under this program. For example, Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, both researchers at the Manhattan Institute, found that after a public school made the “failing” list, school administrators quickly reversed course and made the kinds of changes that allow for success: these schools witnessed an increase in student performance on state standardized tests (they improved faster than most schools).

What is deeply troubling about this decision is that it ratifies the notoriously anti-Catholic Blaine Amendment that is written into Florida’s Constitution. Thirty-seven states have this amendment: a vestige of the 19th century’s raging anti-Catholicism, the purpose of the Blaine amendments is to deny any public monies to Catholic institutions.

Tragically, the Florida ruling cannot be appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court because no federal issues are involved. But this is an issue that will not go away.

Besides vouchers, another way in which school choice can be

exercised is through tuition tax credits. Under this plan, parents of schoolchildren who elect to send their kids to a private or parochial school may be eligible for a tax credit. There are some lawmakers, and executives, who find this idea more attractive than school vouchers. They reason that while vouchers directly benefit the schools, tax credits go to the parents. One of those individuals is Eliot Spitzer, New York's Attorney General and presumptive candidate for governor.

When New York Governor George Pataki recently floated a tuition tax credit, Eliot Spitzer reportedly balked at the idea. Bill Donohue decided to send him the following "open letter," via a news release:

Dear Attorney General Spitzer:

Governor George Pataki recently proposed tuition tax credits for private schools, including parochial ones. I had hoped that you would support this plan, but instead you have chosen to remain non-committal. If anything, you seem to be leaning against this initiative. To be exact, you are quoted in today's New York Sun as saying, "*there will be serious constitutional issues if they [the tax credits] are used for parochial schools.*"

Your comment is somewhat surprising given your previous remarks on this subject. In May 2002, your office released a "Report on Non-Public Education" that was a model of reasonableness. The Report suggested many ways in which private schools, including parochial schools, could receive public funds without violating the First Amendment. While voucher programs and tuition tax credits were not addressed in the Report, your own statement showed how the courts have become increasingly open to innovative programs that assist non-public schools. Indeed, the tenor of your remarks clearly depicted you as someone who was favorably disposed to such programs.

I urge you to support tuition tax credits for parents who send their children to non-public schools. After all, the Pataki proposal is designed to help students who must attend failing public schools. The proposal was made all the more poignant today in a news story in the New York Post: an African-American woman has asked a judge to award her \$26,000 so two of her children in the public schools can attend private ones (it costs New York taxpayers \$13,000 a year per student in the public schools; she has two other children enrolled in a Catholic high school). Her suit is not frivolous given the fact that her 16-year-old daughter was nearly murdered in the local public school. Nonetheless, it could have been avoided altogether had a tuition tax credit been available to her.

We are happy to report that on the day our news release, Spitzer said he supports tuition tax credits. His office confirmed this for us. This is good news given that Spitzer has a good chance of winning the gubernatorial campaign

DEMOCRATS, CATHOLICS AND ABORTION

The anniversary of *Roe v. Wade* provides us an opportunity to make a public comment on the subject of abortion. This year we decided to focus on the Democrats. Here is what we said:

“Now that we’re on the eve of the 33rd anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, the time is apropos to investigate whether the Democratic Party is (a) making an effort to reach out to Catholics, and (b) rethinking its position on abortion.

“After a majority of Catholics voted for a Protestant over a Catholic in the 2004 presidential election, it was widely

reported that the Democrats were going to initiate new efforts to reach out to Catholics. To see if this was happening, I went to the website of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) today and typed the words 'Catholic outreach' into its search engine. One item turned up: a statement opposing a voucher program designed to help Catholic schoolchildren who were devastated by Hurricane Katrina. So this is what the Democrats mean by 'Catholic outreach'—sticking it to innocent Catholic kids.

"On the home page of the DNC's website, there is a section called 'Interview with Eleanor Smeal on Samuel Alito.' Smeal is the same person who, on October 31, warned her fellow feminists that if Alito were to become a Supreme Court Justice, 'the majority of the Court would be Roman Catholics, which would underrepresent other religions, not to mention nonbelievers.' And this is the person the DNC decided to highlight—an anti-Catholic.

"It's not just the DNC that doesn't get it. Consider that the following members of the Senate Judiciary Committee have already declared their opposition to President Bush's Catholic nominee to the high court: Dick Durbin, Ted Kennedy, Patrick Leahy and Ken Salazar. All are Catholic and all are Democrats. Following Smeal's logic, are there too many Catholics on the Senate Judiciary Committee?

"Catholic outreach and rethinking abortion—this is what the Dems preached after they got whipped in 2004. So far, nothing has changed."

Who is to blame for this affront to Catholics? Howard Dean, obviously. As the head of the DNC, he is strategically situated to affect change. But he won't. He shuns the advice of people like James Carville and Paul Begala, both Catholics, who have tried to get fellow Democrats to reach out to the Catholic community.

The problem for the Democrats is that they cannot win the White House without currying favor with pro-life Catholics, but they won't get the money from the fat cats to fund their campaigns if they do. The time has come for them to make some tough decisions. We hope they make the right one.

PELOSI DEFINES "PEOPLE OF FAITH"

On January 26, at the National Press Club in Washington, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi made some comments on President Bush's agenda, and in doing so she touched on the subject of values and religion.

Referring to Democrats, Pelosi said that the "best way...for us to speak to people of faith is in terms of the work we do; in terms of the budget, for example. The budget is a document that's supposed to be a statement of our national values."

By "people of faith," Pelosi meant people like the 114 protesters who were arrested last month for blocking the entrance to the Capitol. "We had the people of faith working against this budget. They had events in the Capitol, they were arrested on the steps of the Cannon Building..."

We released the following statement to the news media on Pelosi's speech:

"Ask anyone leaving church on Sunday what public policy issues motivate 'people of faith' and the likely answer will be such things as abortion, same-sex marriage, assisted suicide, drugs, illegitimacy, etc. Ask Nancy Pelosi and she says the federal budget.

“Worse than her ignorance is her disdain for the faithful. For example, she likes to call those who are pro-life ‘anti-choice.’ She not only objected to the ‘Justice Sunday’ event that took place last April in Louisville, she said the rally (which included several prominent people of faith, myself included) was marked by ‘assaults on the courts.’ When her party lost the 2004 presidential election, she arrogantly said, ‘As a devout Catholic, I observe with great regret the intervention of some Catholic bishops who joined evangelical leaders in the political arena.’ In other words, all these religious leaders not only fail to meet her qualifications for ‘the people of faith’ (as she likes to call them), they are a threat to democracy.

“According to Democratic strategist Paul Begala, on the night of the presidential election, former President Bill Clinton told him, ‘you can’t ignore those social, cultural values voters.’ He was right. Moreover, Clinton knows the difference between a budget and a bible.”

VETERAN PRIEST OFFERS COGENT ADVICE

by Msgr. Desmond P. Dillon

Editor’s note: The following article offers many sensible recommendations from a priest who has witnessed many changes in the Church.

On reaching my 91st birthday January 31, 2006 and my 65th year of priesthood this coming May 22, 2006, I must say that these are in a way the happiest days of my life. As I watch my sunset, I know it won’t be long, but I anticipate being happy

now and happy also in eternity.

Having been in social work for a number of years, trying to make things better for people, my mind turns to the Church that has seen many improvements through the years, especially with Vatican II. I also would like to see things become better in the Church. I think of Pope John XXIII's statement of Vatican II, *Ecclesia Semper Reformanda*—the Church is always to be reformed.

These are some of the improvements I would like to see in our Church:

- The national leadership in education needs to be strengthened by the USCCB with guidelines and criteria of religious education. These should be established for our schools and religious education programs.
- All parishes as far as possible should establish a daily kindergarten class with use of the Montessori Good Shepherd program. With this program, little children will grow up with a solid foundation of faith, enabling them to be good and keep the faith.
- Parents and families also need more religious support for their children.
- Our private schools need their own guidelines. Catholic schools should stand for faith and academic values. Christmas is not just a holiday. Spring break, which is now a debauch, should return to Easter break. Religion courses should be more substantial.
- Catholic schools must serve the poor better. Schools should be supported by parish stewardship with little or no tuition for the poor. Tuition to religious and private schools should be tax exempt and actively supported to get rid of double taxation.

- The definition of the Church as the people of God needs clarification. Our relations and ecumenism with other churches depend on our own understanding of church. What is meant by “the Church is the people of God”?
- The nation-wide clergy sex scandal has brought upon the Church all levels of injustices.
- The well-intentioned Dallas protocols should be revisited and amended.

Although the purging of the Church by the Dallas protocol has done much good, I believe it has also caused much hurt and uncharitableness.

- Transparency of church discipline allowed a hostile press to identify sex abuse against the backdrop of Catholic pro-life teaching.
- About 1% of living clergy have been accused. Other churches, institutions, and schools have higher percentages. From my calculations in social service, I believe that more than 10% of the population transgresses sexual abuse, including incest.
- The breach of confidentiality of clergy-Ordinary relationship has seriously violated a sacred trust.
- Clergy have been punished by so-called administrative leave or suspension without trial, some unjustly, some waiting for years for decisions. Clergy and laity alike have a right to a trial and be heard.
- The evident financial liability fueled the publicity and scandal. Settling problems out of court had good reasons, but the \$5.5 billion in suits against dioceses indicate that the payoff has become legal blackmail. Many of these suits were against long deceased clergy who could not defend themselves. This means that finances of the Church are not protected. No other church has been sued in such large amounts. It was and

is morally very wrong.

- Since the severity of judgments by the dioceses has been financially driven, dioceses should protect finances from liability. Corporation Sole, the legal form in many dioceses, is an open pocket of church money. This legal form once served the Church well against contentious trusteeism. Now it is the *bete noir* of Church scandal. Parishes should be incorporated individually so that some sense of local ownership would be had.

- The faithful of the Church desire very much to see the clergy in clerical garb, especially as they come to liturgical functions. They would also like to see religious women in at least an updated habit rather than civilian attire.

- The practice of retirement for celibate clergy without some ongoing ministry or community seems an awful waste in the priest-shortage society and a denial of their youthful intent and purpose when they were first ordained to serve their whole lives.

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