

TRIBUTE TO FATHER VIRGIL BLUM, S.J.

The Jesuits at Marquette University are fielding the names of priests they would like to honor, whether deceased or living. To that end, Father John Rainaldo, S.J., asked William Donohue to prepare a tribute to Father Blum, founder of the Catholic League. We thought we'd share it with our members.

Although I never had the privilege of meeting Father Virgil Blum, S.J., like everyone associated with the Catholic League I owe him a special debt of gratitude. Father founded the league in 1973, the year of the tragic *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion on demand in all 50 states. The league, of course, was not established primarily as a pro-life organization. Its chief functions were, as they remain, to defend individual Catholics and the institutional Church against slander and discrimination, similar to the Anti-Defamation League's role in defending Jews. Still, it is of more than symbolic importance that he began the work of the Catholic League the year of such a victory for the Culture of Death.

His vision for the league was of laymen and laywomen so burning with love for the Church that they wouldn't hesitate to take whatever Catholic action was necessary to defend her from attack. Long before Pope John Paul II was elected, Father Blum was putting into action the admonition the Holy Father would make to Catholics throughout the world: "Be not afraid!"

Father Blum was among the very earliest proponents of private school vouchers. Back in the 1970s, the ultra-secularists in the bloated, union-dominated public school establishment were certain they would never be called to task on small matters like not being able to teach pupils. And quite frankly, a lot of conservatives of the time balked at supporting vouchers

because they thought such a sweeping reform was a political non-starter in the Carter era. Father Blum knew differently, and his prescience was remarkable. Pro-voucher parents “fear that such legislation, no matter how designed, would be struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court,” he noted in the summer of 1977. “I do not think these fears are justified. A careful study of the reasoning of the Supreme Court...reveals, in my opinion, that education vouchers would meet the established criteria of constitutionality.”

How ahead of the curve Father Blum was. In a landmark case in 2002, the Supreme Court ruled that Cleveland’s voucher program was indeed constitutional, emboldening what is now a legion of highly organized voucher supporters across America. I hope they pay homage to those like Father Blum who long ago planted the seeds of the success they enjoy today.

That kind of political astuteness shouldn’t be surprising coming from an accomplished scholar of political science. Father Blum understood better than most the interplay between politics and culture. But he also, in the true spirit of Vatican II, grasped something that would become vital for the Catholic Church in the final decades of the 20th century: the role of the laity in the defense of the Church.

Since his death in 1990, we at the Catholic League have strived to stay loyal to Father Blum’s mission as we’ve adapted to the age of cable television and the Internet. Like this fine priest and man of action, we’ve tried to be courageous, as well as prudent. And yes, confrontational when necessary.

We hope he’d be proud of how we’ve cared for his legacy.