

Forum

Catholics Have Up-Hill Battle

By Orlan Love
Director of Publications
Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights

Although the American Civil Liberties Union bills itself as the champion of the rights of the individual against abuses of state power, in recent years the ACLU has shown itself to be frequently insensitive — if not antagonistic — to the claims of religious freedom rights.

A priest serves the poor of his neighborhood as an attorney for the Legal Aid Society. He views his work as an integral part of his priestly ministry, and, accordingly, wants to wear his clerical collar in the courtroom. But the district attorney objects, claiming that the Roman collar will bias juries. A judge agrees, and the priest is denied his right to practice law.

A group of students meets for prayer in a public high school classroom before the start of the official school day. Even though this practice is explicitly authorized by their student handbook, and even though other groups of students are meeting in classrooms voluntarily for other non-academic purposes, the local school board tells them they are no longer permitted to pray on the premises.

An evangelical couple find that neither the public nor private schools in their area offer their children instruction which is compatible with their understanding of the Bible. They decide to teach their children at home through a reputable correspondence course. The mother is a qualified teacher, but she refuses to seek state certification because she sincerely believes that to do so would violate her religious principles. The state files criminal charges against the parents for violation of truancy laws.

Where do people like these turn for legal help? Certainly not to the ACLU.

The parties above were aided in pressing their legal claims by the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. Their cases were among a score the Catholic League took on in 1979, and so far at least one of them, that of the people who sought to provide their children education in conformity with their own religious beliefs, has been brought to a successful conclusion.

Legal defense of religious freedom rights — of non-Catholics as well as Catholics — is one of the primary purposes of the league. Since it was founded in 1973, the Milwaukee-based organization has put together an impressive string of legal victories, and the jury is still out on several equally important cases.

In its very first legal battle, the league helped overturn a Colorado law that violated the First Amendment's freedom of speech guarantee by making it a criminal offense to send through the mails literature that "might cause alarm" to its recipients. The client in that case was a Protestant physician, Dr. Frank Bolles, who had been prosecuted and convicted for sending right-to-life literature to his fellow citizens.

Since then, the league has gone to court to defend the right to freely exercise religious beliefs, to fight against employment discrimination, to protect the rights of conscience of people opposed to abortion, to champion the rights of parents to educate and care for their children, and to assure Catholics and other religiously motivated people of the right to participate in the formation of public policy.

At the center of the campaign is the league's general counsel, Robert Destro, a 30-year-old graduate of the University of California School of Law at Berkeley. His experience in defending statutes that restrict the availability of abortion has earned him a reputation as one of the leading strategists of the pro-life movement.

He and his staff attorneys rely for advice and direction upon a seasoned Legal Advisory Committee of five prominent attorneys and law professors, among them, John Noonan and Stuart Hubbell, the league's director of legal services.

As exhilarating and important as the league's legal activities are, Destro acknowledges, the organization is much more than a civil rights union. As defined by its founder and president, Father Virgil C. Blum, SJ, "The League's overall mission is to do for the Catholic community what the Anti-Defamation League, the NAACP and the ACLU have done for their respective constituencies."

Father Blum, professor emeritus of political science at Marquette University, is a veteran of more than a quarter century of fighting for civil rights for Catholics.

As far back as 1953, Father Blum began "to speak up for the right of parents to decide where and how their children will be educated," he recalls. "And I began to speak against the state monopoly in the use of education tax funds. I believed then, and I believe even more firmly now, that as a matter of elementary justice, people should not be denied a fundamental civil right just because they happen not to be wealthy enough to bear the double burden of taxation and tuition."

Year after year Father Blum traveled the country, speaking to hundreds of groups. In half a dozen books and more than 150 articles, he expressed his views on freedom of choice in education. But to little avail.

After struggling nearly in vain for 20 years, Father Blum concluded that it was pointless to keep on arguing in a vacuum for education freedom. "The only way we could solve that problem," he said, "was by solving the more fundamental problem of the place of Catholics in American society. Catholics need to organize to defend their rights and to secure their just claims, and everyone in society has to work together to protect religious freedom and stamp out such prejudices as anti-Catholicism. This is what the Catholic League is all about."

In the past seven years, besides providing legal support in lawsuits involving religious freedom rights, the league has protested vigorously against anti-Catholic defamation. The league's staff generates a steady barrage of letters to offensive newspapers, magazines, broadcasters and public figures, calling attention to their demonstrated lack of sensitivity toward Catholics.

According to Michael Schwartz, the league's director of public affairs, "We regularly see examples of the most outrageous stereotyping, as well as direct attacks on Catholics or the Church, and usually the person responsible for it is unable even to understand why anyone would be upset. After all, he figures, isn't that the way Catholics are?"

According to Schwartz, people are by nature reluctant to acknowledge their own prejudices. "I suppose that the first people to speak out against anti-Semitism and racism encountered the same problem," he said.

Despite such frustrations, there have been bright spots. In 1978, an article personally insulting Cardinal Humberto Medeiros appeared in Boston Magazine, and league protests eventually cost the editor and author of the article their jobs. The New York Times, after years of singling out Catholics in abortion-related news stories, despite reprimands from the National News Council, ended the practice after the league convinced the executive publisher that it was a prejudicial approach.

The league also directs its energies to long-range educational projects and efforts to represent the interests of Catholics in the formation of public policy. League spokesmen have presented testimony to congressional hearings, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, and the White House Conference on Families. The league publishes a monthly newsletter which not only reports on its own activities but also discusses issues from a perspective that is rarely presented elsewhere. And in 1978 the league undertook a study of inner city private schools by which it hopes to shift the focus of the debate over aid to education.

Previous proposals to aid nonpublic education have almost always foundered on the shoals of separation of church and state. But the real issue, as Father Blum steadfastly asserts, is the right of parents to choose the type of school they want for their children — a right he says should not be predicated on the ability to pay.

A Return to Summers of the Past

Rarely do I look forward to a week-long meeting, but there's a community work session coming up which is an exception — because of the location.

The site is a lovely place on a lake in the mountains of western Maryland. Years ago, when its plumbing, heating and beds were much less refined than they are now, I spent several summers there.

In my return to the lake, I'll be searching for some of the mood and memories of those summers.

At that time, our seminary directors probably saw this remote location as a humane respite from a pretty intense year of studies and discipline. Also, I suspect, they saw it as a practical way of keeping a mob of young men isolated from "the world" during a few months of a more relaxed schedule.

"The world" was a big threat to seminarians in those days. It was seen as holding out all kinds of allurements which might confuse us. Some of those allurements (especially — heaven help us — women) might even tempt us to leave the religious life.

Whatever the reason for

Fr. John Reedy

Looking for the Lord



the camp, it provided an experience which I recognize as very important for my life.

For one thing, it provided an opportunity for us to learn to live with each other in the community which was to be the family environment of our lives.

Lord knows, we lived in a tight community during the academic year, but the schedule and the studies were so intense that we could easily lose ourselves in these efforts, without focusing very much on the satisfactions and difficulties of living with this particular group of men.

During the summer, with a much lighter schedule, we became much more aware of each other as individuals and as a group. We came to know the abstraction, "community," as containing joyful, generous, talented people, and also people who were moody, sensitive, prickly. We learned the art of living with the variety;

Looking Back . . .

75 years ago this week — "At the big C.M.B.A. initiation last Thursday evening, Rev. William Kessel of St. Joseph's Church opened the meeting with prayer and the following officers were selected: Chancellor, William J. Hauser, C.M. Bayer, chairman; Jacobs J. Fess, 1st vice president; James O'Neill, second vice president; Wm. J. Keayes, secretary; Mr. Pappert, marshal, and A.J. Lambert, guard." That's the Catholic Men's Benevolent Association and how come Pappert alone rates a "Mr.?"

Remember the time of the six-day work week? On top of the Burke, Fitz Simons, Hone & Co. Page 2 ad was the notice, "Burke's will close at 1 o'clock every Saturday during July and August."

50 years ago this week — Talk about the beatification of Kateri Tekakwitha! On July 3, 1930, was the news of the canonization of the other North American martyrs, Father Isaac Jogues, Father Jean deBrebeuf, Father Noel Chabanel, Father Antoine Daniel, Father Charles Garnier, Father Gabriel Lalemant, Brother Jean de la Lande and Brother Rene Goupil. They were among 10 saints announced by Pope Pius XI as "all of Rome's 400 churches united in ringing out the glad tidings."

Inside, "ground was broken July 4th for the spacious new Motherhouse of the Sisters of Mercy to be erected Our Lady of Mercy on Blossom Road."

25 years ago this week — Pope Pius XII reaffirmed that "Catholic social teaching fully supports the right of workers to organize unions to defend their just claims and improve their standards of living." "Bishop Kearney Dedicates Imposing New St. Vincent Church, Rectory in Corning" read the headline announcing news of the new Corning church. Father Joseph V. Guilfoil was the first pastor.

10 years ago this week — End of the line for three Catholic high schools. The last graduates marched to "Pomp and Circumstance" at King's Prep, Mt. Carmel in Auburn and St. Anthony Prep in Watkins Glen . . . Brotherly news — Rt. Rev. Robert R. Spears was installed as the fifth bishop of the Episcopal Diocese . . . And just think of it, hamburger was 55 cents a pound at Star markets — but only if you bought three pounds or more! And if you could afford a stack of five or more steaks, you paid just 95 cents a pound.

prayer; not a lot of pious words, but a realization of God's presence in life and the meaning of that presence with regard to the commitment I was making.

Often during these years of turmoil in the church, I've tried to extricate myself from the pressures and concerns and disappointments of the day. I reached back to that sense of purpose, that sense of vocation, that awareness of God that I came to know during those summers.

Today there are many different theories of what life in a religious community should be. Though we should be honest in self-criticism and open to change, the community which I came to know as a seminarian has been, for me, rich in its people, in its humanity, in its support.

And the loneliness, which comes in every life, has been far less threatening because, there in the mountains, beside the lake, I came to understand that I'm never really alone.

The week of meetings will not allow time for me to recover the mood of those summers, but I look forward to a return to a setting which contributed much, that is good to my life.

most of us learned to treasure it.

But something else happened during those summers. They provided time for us to be quiet, space for us to be alone, an opportunity to become reflective, comfortable with ourselves.

The first few days were always an ordeal for me; the activity of the year left me feeling that I always had to be doing something, using time effectively. Doing nothing carried a sense of guilt.

Then my motor would slow down. I would find that I could sit quietly on a log and stare at the lake for an hour or more. I could lie quietly at night on the sleeping porch and absorb something rich and good from the dark silhouette of the mountains against the night sky.

With this slowing down, there came a deeper sense of