

Controversy lingers over prayer in public schools

Continued from page 1

argued that prayer frequently has been a part of graduation ceremonies. He charged that the majority's decision "lays waste a tradition that is as old as public school graduation ceremonies themselves."

A similar situation occurred in Richmond, Va., in June, 1991, while Michael Theisen was serving as director of religious education at that city's Church of the Epiphany.

Theisen, currently the youth coordinator for the Diocese of Rochester, was asked to speak at a public school's baccalaureate service which was being conducted at Epiphany church.

"They wanted me to do a welcoming kind of statement. But the senior class adviser approached me and said, 'Now, we have to make sure we don't use the name of God.' I said, 'Why? But I did it anyway,'" remarked Theisen, who added that the students themselves made religious references during the ceremony.

"It's a bit ridiculous," he remarked. "It seems like (school officials) wanted it both ways. They didn't want prayers, but they still wanted the invocation in a church setting."

Another dispute regarding prayer in a school setting arose earlier this month in Wayland, Steuben County.

St. Joseph's Church, 206 Fremont St., had been conducting after-school religious-education classes at Wayland Central Schools until a protest from a sixth-grade instructor forced the school district to disallow the practice.

According to Father Paul Schnacky, St. Joseph's pastor, the district had agreed when it was formed in 1950 not to prohibit the one-hour religious-education classes — which were held once a week after the school day had ended — unless a formal complaint was lodged.

Father Schnacky said he wasn't terribly upset about the district's recent action. He simply moved the religious education classes, numbering about 75 children, to St. Joseph's School.

"I knew what the agreement was. But what does upset me is that this upsets the community," he remarked.

Father Schnacky went on to explain that safety was the only reason the classes had been held at the public schools in the first place. "It was easier for a few instructors to go to the public schools than to have several students walk to our school," he said.

Disputes similar to Wayland's have spurred numerous Supreme Court de-

isions over the last three decades — mostly in reaction to state statutes. Among the most significant are:

- *Engel v. Vitale*, 1962 — Ruled unconstitutional a requirement that students recite a state-composed prayer in the classroom.

- *School District of Abington Township v. Schempp*, 1963 — Decreed that prayer, as well as Bible reading, in a school setting is unconstitutional.

- *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 1968 — Determined that a law prohibiting the teaching of evolution was unconstitutional.

- *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 1971 — Established the three-part "Lemon Test," to evaluate the separation of church and state in legislation. The test states that a law is invalid if it does not have a secular intent; primarily promotes religion; or creates excessive entanglement with religion.

Although school officials in Rochester and Monroe County said they did not recall any local school-prayer controversies, they warned that the potential for such conflicts is high.

Adam Kaufman, counsel for the Rochester City School District, noted that he occasionally is faced with questions pertaining to religious references in school assemblies, such as the use of gospel music or Christmas carols.

And Dr. John Woods, executive director of the Monroe County School Boards Association, said the potential for dispute is ever-present because some New York state statutes do not adhere strictly to Supreme Court rulings on the separation of church and state.

For example, he said, New York Education Law Section 3029-a provides that a teacher may conduct a moment of silence at the opening of each school day if so authorized by that school district's board of education.

"That statute hasn't been challenged that I know of, but if it was, I imagine it could be taken to a higher court," Woods acknowledged.

To counter the pattern of Supreme Court rulings, California Congressman William Dannemeyer, R-39th District, has worked feverishly during the last three years to pass a constitutional amendment that would make public-school prayer permissible.

HJ Res 240, known as the Voluntary Prayer in School Amendment, states:

"Nothing in this Constitution shall prohibit the inclusion of voluntary prayer in any public school program or activity. Neither the United States nor

any State shall prescribe the content of any such prayer."

Paul Mero, a Washington, D.C.-based spokesman for Dannemeyer, said it is important for children of all religious affiliations to be aware of a higher authority.

"We feel there's a secular interest in allowing children the formal opportunity to acknowledge that there's a creator. If not, then they grow up believing that their rights came from men," Mero remarked.

But Dannemeyer did not succeed in bringing HJ Res 240 to the House floor by the time the 102nd Congress adjourned earlier this month. And Mero is not optimistic that the proposal will ever be approved by the Democrat-dominated Congress.

"I think the public would like what we have to offer, but the liberal majority is going to beat this bill to a pulp," he said.

Mero charged that neither the legislature nor the judiciary practices what it preaches when it comes to public prayer.

"How come it's OK to start Supreme Court and Congress sessions with

prayer?" he asked rhetorically.

Mero went on to predict that the "one nation under God" portion of the Pledge of Allegiance and the "In God We Trust" slogans on U.S. coins and currency eventually will be eliminated as well.

"This is a reflection of the pagan society in which we live," Father Schnacky observed of the perceived pattern of eliminating religion from public life. "Not only do politicians have the attitude (that no form of prayer should be allowed in public schools), but so do most of the people."

Given the difficulty of obtaining the freedom to pray in public schools, Father Schnacky suggested that Catholics in public-school settings should concentrate more on the examples they set than on the words they speak.

"I don't think there's any way of getting religion, or the name of God, in schools," he commented. "What I would do, instead, is work with Catholic teachers in public schools and help them see the dignity of their vocation and the good they can do."

Contains information from Catholic News Service reports.

D'Amato endorses Bush proposal in Rochester visit

Continued from page 3

Robert Abrams, does support the right of parents to choose whatever public school they wish to attend.

"He does not believe the taxpayers should have to subsidize private schools," according to David Shapiro, deputy issues director for the Abrams' campaign.

Monroe County Legislator William P. Polito (8th District-Webster), who is running against U.S. Congresswoman Louise M. Slaughter (Dem.-30th District), vowed his support of the school-choice proposal following a workshop at the convention.

Michael Kiernan, a Slaughter spokesman, told the *Catholic Courier* that the congresswoman "believes our first obligation is to improve public schools." Kiernan added that Slaughter has said the "courts have held that the use of public funds for sectarian purposes is unconstitutional."

A school-choice proposal will be introduced into the New York State Assembly in 1993, according to Kevin M. Donoghue, executive director of the New York State Federation of Catholic School Parents. Donoghue made his remarks during the late-morning workshop Polito attended.

Interestingly, given Slaughter's objections to school vouchers on constitutional grounds, the New York bill's provisions state that funds cannot be used for religious instruction, and that "these funds shall not constitute aid to any church, sect, religious denomination or sectarian institution."

The state bill — if enacted — would phase in a voucher system over five years for every child, starting with the poorest 20 percent in the first year, and reaching all children by the fifth year.

The initial voucher amount would be \$1,600. By the fifth year, this figure would increase to \$3,200. Poor children and learning-disabled students would receive supplemental funding, and parents who teach their children at home would also be eligible for coverage in the bill.

One-fourth of the money for vouchers would come from the state, with the remainder coming from local



Kevin M. Donoghue, executive director of the New York State Federation of Catholic School Parents, discusses school choice.

school districts. Because the current average cost to educate public-school students in the state is \$8,000, Donoghue claimed that the school voucher system could potentially save taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars. The system would channel fewer tax funds into private schools that operate more efficiently than the public schools, he noted.

Donoghue explained that public and private school parents across the state are unhappy with the current state of their school systems and are ready to support school choice. He rhetorically observed that where he lives on Long Island, "they're ready to take pitchforks in hand," property-owning taxpayers are so angry with the current state of the public school system.

In other news at the convention, the federation's Rochester chapter announced that it will begin publishing a newsletter the first week of November.

According to the chapter's press release, the newsletter will feature local school news and events, state and local federation news, voucher and school choice updates, "Christian family life" articles, and editorials.

EDITORS' NOTE: Any school representatives, principals or teachers interested in the federation's newsletter should contact Mary C. Nicholson, newsletter coordinator, at 716/265-0611, or write: 31 Hawley Dr., Webster, N.Y., 14580.

@ bituary

Memorial service set for Deacon Vazquez, served at St. Michael's Church in Rochester

A memorial service for Deacon Julio Vazquez will take place at St. Michael's Church, 869 N. Clinton Ave., Rochester, on Saturday, Nov. 7, at 12:30 p.m.



Deacon Vazquez, who served at St. Michael's from 1982 to 1988, died in Puerto Rico on Sunday, Oct. 4, 1992. He was 66 years old. Deacon Vazquez had been living in Puerto Rico since he left Rochester four years ago, according to Deacon John Holmes, director of the diocesan Department of the Permanent Diaconate.

Born in Guayama, Puerto Rico on

Jan. 9, 1926, Deacon Vazquez married his wife, Maria Rosa, on Aug. 22, 1946. The couple moved to the United States on May 29, 1959.

He attended the Christian Cursillo in 1968, when he became involved with Rochester's Hispanic community. A member of the diocese's first permanent diaconate class in 1982, he was assigned to St. Michael's Parish. A self-described charismatic, he directed a prayer group at St. Michael's for a number of years.

Those wishing to send condolences to the family can write: Familia Julio Vazquez, Calle Cristo Rey, 80 Olimpo, Buzon Numero 2, Parcela 703, Guayama, Puerto Rico, 00654.