

RICO verdict attacks free speech

EDITORIAL

Gun-control advocates rally outside a manufacturing facility to protest easy availability of handguns in the United States.

A coalition of animal-rights groups stages a series of protests outside stores that sell fur coats.

Family and women's groups picket outside a chain of stores selling magazines considered pornographic.

On the surface, these three efforts — which have all occurred in recent years — would seem to have little in common.

But if an April 20 federal court ruling is upheld, the individuals involved in these activities all could potentially become embroiled in a battle over free speech.

A U.S. District Court jury in Chicago found Joseph M. Scheidler of the Pro-Life Action League and several other pro-life leaders guilty of 21 acts of extortion during attempts to close down abortion clinics. The acts were defined as violations of the federal Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organization (RICO) statute — a law originally intended to help fight organized crime.

Attorneys for the plaintiff — the National Organization for Women — acknowledged that Scheidler and the others had not themselves committed acts of physical violence. Indeed, they were not directly connected with individuals who had committed acts of violence. But, the lawyers argued, they had "created a climate that encouraged others to commit violence."

That bears repeating. They were convicted not of committing or encouraging acts of violence, but of creating a climate in which such acts might take place.

Thus, essentially, they were found guilty of speaking out — a right supposedly guaranteed by the Constitution. A right regularly exercised by activist groups in this nation.

Recognizing the potential implications of the suit, a number of groups endorsed a Seamless Garment Network ad in the March 27, 1994, edition of *The New York Times*. The ad decried the U.S. Supreme Court decision of Jan. 24, 1994, which allowed RICO to be used in the Scheidler case. Among the groups endorsing the ad were the International Black Women's Network, the Anti-Fascist Network, the Georgia Death Penalty Abolitionists and The Catholic Peace Fellowship.

These groups fear that broadening the application of RICO could make all activist groups subject to prosecution. Thus individuals protesting handguns, fur and pornography, for example, could face RICO charges under the right circumstances.

Meanwhile, other protesters who commit acts of civil disobedience at abortion clinics likewise could become subject to RICO by being linked with the "conspiracy" plaintiffs alleged in this case. And those individuals who by their words seem to encourage protests — church officials or editorial writers, for example — could possibly be subject to prosecution as well.

If that seems absurd, just look at how broadly some other federal statutes have been interpreted. In countless cases, private prayers have been banned in schools and individuals have been forbidden to wear crosses or have religious symbols at work because of overzealous interpretations of federal guidelines.

In many instances, people have curtailed constitutionally guaranteed activities because they feared legal consequences.

One can only hope that the verdict will somehow be overturned. Otherwise, individuals concerned about any number of moral and ethical issues may find themselves pressured into silence.

And, as Pope Boniface VIII contended, "Silence gives consent."

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The Catholic Courier wishes to provide space for readers throughout the diocese to express opinions on all sides of the issues. We welcome original, signed letters about current issues affecting church life.

Although we cannot publish every letter we receive, we seek, insofar as possible, to provide a balanced representation of expressed opinions and a variety of reflections on life in the church. We will choose letters for publication based on likely reader interest, timeliness and a sense of fair play. Our discerning readers may determine whether to agree or disagree with the letter writers' opinions.

Letters must not exceed 500 words. Anonymous letters and the use of pseudonyms are unacceptable. We reserve the right to edit letters for legal and other concerns. With respect to errors in submitted text, we will correct spelling only.

Mail letters to: Catholic Courier, P.O. Box 24379, Rochester, N.Y. 14624. Please include your full name, phone number and complete address for purposes of verification.

Tragedy shows need to talk with teenagers

To the editors:

I am sure that many of your readers join me in the profound sadness of the last few weeks as we have witnessed the tragedies of junior high school students shooting at and murdering their teachers and fellow students. ... The fact that these educators' lives were cut so abruptly, the fact that they leave behind families and students who loved them, the fact that their deaths were so unnecessary — these facts can only stun us into motionless reflection over the ever-haunting question: Why? And then we add to this the young people numbered among the wounded and killed. ... Their parents and siblings are changed forever. Their classmates now live with fear during years that should be lived with dreaming.

Since 1981, I have worked in ministry as a volunteer catechist, as a professional lay minister and as a priest. My ministry has always involved teaching children, mostly of junior high school and high school age. I am deeply and profoundly

saddened by these horrible images now part of the lives of the people involved. ... These children are our children. These teachers are our teachers. These families are our families.

I throw no stones at the teens who shot the guns. I will never understand their pain and the confusion their souls must have felt then and must feel now. All I can do, with you, is shake my head in disbelief that this has happened and pray to our tender-caring God that somehow, some way — grace may happen in their young lives again. While my anger moves me to want revenge, my faith moves me to seek understanding and to pray for reconciliation.

As St. James so wisely wrote almost 2,000 years ago, we should not just be hearers of God's Word, but doers as well (James 1:22). ... You, who are parents, please talk to your children. Listen to them seriously and take nothing they say nor do for granted. Don't be ashamed to ask for advice or assistance from someone you trust if you

have questions or fears, if you simply do not know what to do. If you must err, err on the side of loving and forgiving, not on rejection nor being dismissive.

And to you teens and young adults ... please know that there is someone out there who will listen and understand you. No matter what you may have done, no matter what you may be feeling — there is someone who will accept you as you are and love you. I pray you never reach such a point of desperation in your life that you would ever consider taking another's life or your own. There is never any shame in saying to a priest, a youth minister, a trusted teacher or guidance counselor: "I may need help in sorting this thing out."

These unnecessary deaths ... tear at our hearts and even, sometimes, break them. Jesus knows our pain. ... Let us trust in resurrection faith and be fed with the Bread of Life.

Father Lee P. Chase, Parochial Vicar
St. Joseph Church, Penfield

Don't accommodate unworthy reception of Eucharist

To the editors:

Regarding President Clinton's reception of Holy Communion, anyone who imagines that this was in any way acceptable is gravely mistaken. Helen Schultz (letter, April 16) claims that Father Makobane was "gracious" to give the President the sacred Host; did she stop to think where the real graciousness lies?

In the sacrament of the Eucharist, Jesus is made really and truly present to us, not only as our brother and friend, but as our Savior, Creator, and Almighty God. It is the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity Who condescends to enter into our unworthy hearts, to unite us completely with Him in the most exquisite foretaste of Heaven that we shall ever know on earth. Please, think about what it means! The angels themselves are denied what we are privileged to receive.

This is our faith; can we not see, by virtue of what Holy Communion actually is, what an affront it is to God when He is forced to enter the heart of someone who does not even profess to believe that he is receiving his God? It is not a question of presuming to know Clinton's conscience.

Marie Louise Skelly wonders if it is "possible that Christ really wanted to be received by President Clinton." Not only possible, it is assuredly true, for He wants all of us to come to Him and said, "unless you

eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink His blood, you have no life in you" (John 6:52). But Our Lord must be received *worthily*, with the necessary faith in and reverence for the Sacrament; note St. Paul's unequivocal condemnation of unworthy communion in 1 Cor. 11:27: "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord."

John's sixth chapter shows there can be no accommodation to worldly sentiment when dealing with the Eucharist. Though He lost a great many followers that day, Jesus did not soften His message; He did not

change it; He did not even explain it. Instead, He demanded an answer which could be based only on faith when He asked, "Will you also go away?" (John 6:67).

President Clinton, and anyone who does not share the Catholic faith, has necessarily "gone away." We must pray that everyone will come to see the love of Jesus' true presence waiting for them in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, but until they do, it is a sacrilege to allow Our Lord to be received by someone who neither believes what the Eucharist really means nor publicly professes such belief.

Catherine A. Lawson
Arrowhead Way South, Fairport

Hopes columnist finds another church

To the editors:

I do wish that Father Richard McBrien would look for a church he would like instead of bashing the Catholic Church we love. There are so many Protestant churches out there that would fill the bill. No Pope, no tradition, no catechism, no celibacy, plenty of women ministers. There is even less church history to deplore since these churches broke away at different times from the Church Christ founded when He said, "Thou art Peter

and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

Doris Pace
Strong Hall, Keuka Park

EDITORS' NOTE: We will continue to publish letters taking issue with specific points discussed by Father McBrien, but this is the last letter we will publish decrying his general outlook on the church or lobbying for his dismissal. For the record, we will not submit to pressure to cancel Father McBrien's column.