

# COLUMNISTS

## Freedom of religion, freedom from religion

The recent Supreme Court ruling against student-led prayer at high school football games has provoked the usual round of indignant reactions. A particular segment of the U.S. religious community seized upon Chief Justice William Rehnquist's dissenting view that the decision "bristles with hostility to all things religious in public life." Presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan called for open defiance of the court's ruling.

Justice John Paul Stevens, writing for the 6-3 majority, noted that even when attendance is voluntary and the decision to pray is made by students, "the delivery of a pre-game prayer has the improper effect of coercing those present to participate in an act of religious worship."

Although the decision did not touch directly upon the increasingly popular practice of student-led prayer at graduations, the majority opinion also cast serious doubt on its constitutionality. If and when the court rules on that practice, the howls of protest are likely to be equal in volume.

This latest case involved a small school district in south Texas whose central argument before the court was that such prayers were not mandated by the school district and could not be considered an unconstitutional "establishment" of religion in violation of the First Amendment.



### essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

The school district also argued that a prohibition of student-led prayer would amount to censorship of religious speech in a public forum.

But the majority of the court concluded that such prayers are not private speech and that a football game is not a public forum for unlimited free expression. "These invocations," Justice Stevens wrote, "are authorized by a government policy and take place on government property at government-sponsored school-related events."

The school district's protestations notwithstanding, "the realities of the situation plainly reveal that its policy involves both perceived and actual endorsement of religion." That policy clearly indicated, without saying so explicitly, that the student was expected to deliver a religious message. Any other solemn, nonreligious

message, such as a commentary on U.S. foreign policy, would be prohibited, Justice Stevens pointed out.

He also challenged the accusation that the majority was hostile to religion. Neither the Constitution nor the court, he wrote, prohibit all religious activity in our public schools or prevent any public school student from voluntarily praying before, during or after the school day.

"But the religious liberty protected by the Constitution is abridged when the state affirmatively sponsors the particular practice of prayer."

Although this latest ruling is entirely consistent with previous court rulings, a certain segment of the population (including an increasing number of Catholics) continues to find the reasoning difficult to understand.

"I wonder how long it will be," one woman told *The New York Times*, "before they tell us we can't pray in public places."

"If people are bothered by a bunch of kids getting together to pray before a game," one man said, "well, I just don't understand."

These and other critics of the court's decision miss the point. The court is not saying that it is unconstitutional for people to pray in public places. If "a bunch of kids" want to get together for a pre-game

prayer, no one is stopping them.

But the prayer must be (1) voluntary, (2) not imposed on others who do not wish to join in the prayer, and, what is of crucial importance, (3) not officially sponsored by a government agency, such as a public school district.

There is a theological as well as a constitutional principle at issue here. According to Catholic teaching, the state has no competence in the area of religion in general nor over such particular religious activities as calling people to prayer.

When America was quasi-officially Protestant in character, Catholics and Jews opposed government-sponsored religious activities. The religious landscape has changed dramatically. Catholics are now the largest single religious denomination. But the principle remains the same. Catholics should not now be joining in the chorus of boos for this latest decision.

It is the genius of the American system of government that there is, on the one hand, complete freedom of religion without interference from the state, and, on the other hand, complete freedom from religion for those who do not wish to have it imposed by any agency of the state.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

## The Transfiguration means we must listen, obey

The Transfiguration of the Lord (Aug. 6): (R3) Mark 9:2-10; (R1) Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; (R2) 2 Peter 1:16-19.

The transfiguration of our Lord occurred about six days after Peter's confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi. There, Peter had confessed that Jesus was the son of the living God. The voice from the cloud at the Transfiguration confirmed Peter's confession: "This is my beloved Son." But at Caesarea, Peter protested that Jesus had to suffer. So the voice of God at the Transfiguration said, "Listen to him," when he says he must suffer and die.

The cloud was the symbol of God the Father. In Jewish thought, the presence of God was always connected with a cloud. It was in a cloud that Moses met God on Mt. Sinai, that God came to the Tabernacle. It was a cloud that filled the Temple when Solomon dedicated it. Now the voice from the cloud was that of God the Father.

The essential meaning of the Transfiguration account is summed up in the divine statement: "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." In Jesus, God's favor is most fully expressed. Men must respond to him.

We respond to him by listening to and obeying the church. The church is Christ on earth. Who hears her, hears Jesus.



### a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

We must join the church. For the church is a divine institution founded by Christ with him as its head. The church is a vital force for good in the world. By staying outside the church, we cause others to stay outside too. And if everyone followed that example, there would be no church. In the day of judgment, what explanation will we be able to give God for being indifferent to his church?

Theodore Roosevelt once said: "I know all the excuses for not going to church. I know one can worship God in a grove of trees or by a running brook or in one's own home as well as in church. But I also know as a matter of cold fact that the average man does not thus worship."

How much we owe the church! She blesses babies by baptism, guides youth by

teaching the commandments, sanctifies marriages and home life. She urges people to follow Christ. She offers highest worship to God in Holy Mass. She guides all to a future life.

Peter responded to being on the mount to witness the Transfiguration. "Rabbi, it is good that we are here!" The place was good: apart from the world, from the busy anxious crowd, from a world of toil and tears. The company was good: Jesus, Moses and Elijah. The conversation was good: the death of Jesus and the glory that would follow. The vision was the bright cloud, the heavenly voice, the transfigured Christ. It was good for the mind, enabling the Apostles to foresee the coming passion of Jesus. It was good for the heart and soul inspiring faith, hope and love.

This manifestation of Jesus' divine glory was designed to confirm the Apostles' faith, to comfort them in the approaching sufferings of their Master, to prepare them to see in his passion the fulfillment alike of the Law and the prophets, to give them a glimpse of the celestial majesty of him whom they had given up all to follow.

As regards our Lord, he was about to descend into the valley of death. From this time forward, there is a perceptible change. Miracles which hitherto had

abounded, now well-nigh cease. Only five mark the period between the Transfiguration and the Passion. Those, for whom signs could avail, were already won. For the rest, no more could be done. They were like those, amongst whom in his earlier ministry, "He could do no mighty work because of their unbelief."

As regards his teaching, public addresses, so common before, become rare. His revelations now are only to the Twelve.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

### Daily Readings

Monday, August 7

Jeremiah 28:1-17; Matthew 14:13-21

Tuesday, August 8

Jeremiah 30:1-2, 12-15, 18-22; Matthew 14:22-36

Wednesday, August 9

Jeremiah 31:1-7; Matthew 15:21-28

Thursday, August 10

2 Corinthians 9:6-10; John 12:24-26

Friday, August 11

Nahum 2:1, 3, 3:1-3, 6-7; Matthew 16:24-28

Saturday, August 12

Habakkuk 1:12-2:4; Matthew 17:14-20

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