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Lessons in the vindication of Conn. Catholics

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 1, 2009 NCR Today

Connecticut's Attorney General has ruled that the Catholic church in the state does not have to register as a lobbyist in order to, well, lobby the legislature because the state's lobbying laws are probably unconstitutional for failing to exempt religious organizations. In short, the First Amendment trumps the state's ethics laws.

The decision is unsurprising. In fact, what surprises is that the ethics board even thought to investigate the three dioceses of Connecticut which mounted a successful campaign to kill a bill that sought to re-organize the way Catholic churches are incorporated in the state. That bill was as foolish as the ethics board investigation, unless you see it for what it is: payback.

The Catholic church has been front and center in the effort to block gay marriage in the state of Connecticut. State Senator Andrew MacDonald, who sponsored the initial incorporation bill, was one of the first openly gay members of the legislature and a leading advocate of the gay marriage law. So, he and the Catholic church have a bit of a history that might be opaque to outside observers.

The other part of the story has, given yesterday's decision by the Minnesota Supreme Court, more national ramifications. Both houses of the Connecticut state legislature have veto-proof majorities. So, despite the fact that Connecticut has a Republican governor, the Democratic Party runs the state. Power, you will recall, corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. So, state taxpayers are shelling out money for frivolous attacks on the church that are really attacks on the First Amendment.

As Democrats celebrate the seating of Senator Al Franken and the achievement of a filibuster-proof majority in the U.S. Senate, they should be mindful of the shenanigans in Connecticut. There are many ways to become out of touch with both the common sensibilities of your constituents and with the best constitutional traditions of the nation, and one of those ways is to have too much power.

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