

A Right-Wing Republican Conspiracy

by Thomas C. Reeves

The war on Christmas, waged almost exclusively by leftists, was in full swing again this year. (For some of the details, see www.catholicleague.org/linked%20docs/christmas_watch.htm.) The declared reason, of course, is the separation of church and state. But that principle, wisely designed by the Founding Fathers to prevent a state church, is wearing thin as an excuse to transform the holiday into a strictly secular event. People have been fighting back, determined to defend the freedom of religion protected by the First Amendment and prevent a small minority from banning public acknowledgment of the faith shared by the vast majority of Americans. In New York City, for example, the Catholic League again received permission from the New York City Parks Department to put a life-sized crèche in Central Park. (Orthodox Jews legally display a large menorah nearby.) And in Racine, Wisconsin, a retired technical college administrator showed extraordinary courage in a winning battle to display a Nativity scene on public land after an absence of forty years.

As Christmas, 2005 approached, Bob Wortock, a devout Catholic, became upset by the banning of religious displays by city officials and the absence of Christmas music in the stores and schools. He spent five hours one day driving around Racine, looking for anything remotely Christian. "Finally, I found a small crèche in a Chinese restaurant, of all places," he later told a reporter, "and one of the store windows in West Racine had 'Merry Christmas' painted on it by some schoolchildren. Other than that, there was nothing." He decided to do what he could to restore what had once been a thriving and joyous community celebration of Christmas.

Wortock approached every church in the area, asking them to support an effort to place a religious banner or crèche in the city as a sign of the religious nature of Christmas. Of 155 letters sent, there were 16 positive responses. Pressure generated by the proposal soon shrank that number to ten, representing Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox churches. The response of City Hall to Wortock's proposal was entirely negative. Wortock said later, "The city attorney told me that I had a 'snowball's chance in hell to get anything religious up in this town.'" Mayor Gary Becker, a Democrat who once snubbed President Bush when he visited the city, "said the whole thing was a right-wing, Republican conspiracy to divide and destroy the country."

Wortock persevered, believing earnestly that he was doing God's will and was making an effort that would be appreciated by the great majority of Racine residents. Beginning in January, 2006 he began appearing before local government committees, trying to receive permission to construct a single banner or a crèche. More than 15 times he made his plea before an assortment of

government bodies. The committees were almost entirely hostile, bolstered by a visit from an atheist group from Madison, complaining bitterly about the “unconstitutional” nature of Wortock’s proposal.

The mood of civic authorities changed somewhat in September when the local churches formally gave their support. In late November of this year, the city’s Common Council granted permission for the construction of a crèche in Monument Square, the heart of Racine’s downtown area. If Council members thought that the delay would deter Wortock from constructing anything, they underestimated his determination.

With a small amount of donated funds, Wortock and a team of supporters worked around the clock inside a friend’s two-car heated garage to build a display. After nine exhausting days, the volunteers met the self-imposed deadline, placing the 8 feet long, 8 feet high, and 3 feet deep Nativity in Monument Square exactly 12 days before Christmas. The lighted Nativity, encased in clear Lexon, includes statues of Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus. Wortock hopes to expand the crèche next year by adding the three wise men and a shepherd, and turn the project over entirely to the Christmas Coalition of Churches.

People in Racine have greeted the display enthusiastically. And Wortock’s courage seems to be catching on with others in the community. “A lot of the stores are now putting things up and saying ‘Merry Christmas,’” Wortock reports, “and I am starting to see crèches all over the place; it has been wonderful. I even received a letter from a 101-year-old woman who said that she was thankful for the coalition of churches who were courageous enough to stand up for Christmas this year. She said she didn’t think she’d ever live to see a Nativity on public property again in her lifetime.”

Shortly after the crèche went up, someone smashed the windows of Wortock’s car. A church that supported his effort was ransacked, and a church member was mugged. In an interview with this writer, Wortock said that while the incidents were reported to the police, he did not inform the press. “That would be negative,” he told this writer. And he has forgiven the assailants.

A sign on the crèche says that two video cameras are running at all times, an effort to protect the small structure. So far this has been successful.

A single individual can make a difference. Just such courageous people wrote and have defended the First Amendment from those who would squelch free speech and crush all religion.