FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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MAILED & FAXED (337)942-0204

August 12, 2011

Michael D. Nassif, Superintendent
St. Landry Parish School Board
1013 E Creswell Lane
PO box 310
Opelousas LA 70571-0310

Re: Misappropriation of Opelousas High School for Religious Ritual

Dear Superintendent:

On behalf of FFRF members and complainants in the St. Landry Parish School Board, I am writing to object to the bizarre decision by principal Rodney Johnson to permit Rev. Jaison Mangalath of Holy Ghost Catholic Church, on behalf of the Blood Covenant Women of God from the church, to "bless every inch of the school" on Wednesday to "pray for the children and teachers to have a good year and let the school community know that they are in our prayers." Our national organization, with more than 16,600 members nationwide, including members in Opelousas and Louisiana, works to safeguard the constitutional principle of the separation between state and church.

Opelousas High School is public property, and may not be taken over, even temporarily, by religious proselytizers. It is immaterial that none of the parents, teachers and students invited to attend were in attendance. The religious rituals encompassing the entire school were directed at students, parents and staff. Mangalath, after a sectarian liturgy, asked "God's blessing on our students and our teachers and also this institution as we begin this academic year."

The principal's decision to grant preferential access to "every inch of school" for religious purposes and purely religious purveys conveys an impermissible endorsement of religion, this particular congregational and the Roman Catholic denomination in particular. What next? An exorcism of school grounds with principal consent?

According to a news story in the Daily World (copy attached) http://www.dailyworld.com/article/20110812/NEWS01/108120315, "Mangalath blessed classrooms, hallways, offices and meeting areas, sprinkling holy water throughout the school as the group followed behind and recited the Haily Mary. At the end, the prayer was extended to all schools and the group thanked Johnson for allowing them to bless their school."

This misappropriation of a public school is in violation of the Louisiana Bill of Rights (Section 4) ensuring that "no preference ever be given to, nor any discrimination be

made against, any church, sect, or creed of religion, or any form of religious faith or worship."

It is well settled under the U.S. Constitution that public schools may not advance, prefer or promote religion. *See generally, Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38 (1985); *Epperson v. Arkansas,* 393 U.S. 97 (1967); *Sch. Dist. of Abington Twshp. v. Schempp,* 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962). The "[s]chool sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible because it sends the ancillary message to members of the audience who are nonadherents 'that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community and accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.'" *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309-10 (2001). Public school officials may not grant special access to clergy to perform religious rituals to "bless" the school.

Although this letter is accompanied by an open records request to determine whether there was a rental arrangement, we want to be very clear that, in the unlikely event there was such an arrangement, it too would indicate an unconstitutional collaboration by your public school district with an event whose sole purpose was to enact a religious ritual at the school. One of your public schools — a secular hall of learning — being used in this manner ought to be highly embarrassing to the District, and has caused great consternation among our membership.

We seek an investigation into how the principal came to make such an error of judgment, granting permission for this unconstitutional use of a public building. We ask that a report on the findings go into his personnel files, that he be appropriately reprimanded and disciplined, and that the District takes proactive steps to ensure this or anything similar will not recur in your public schools.

May we hear from you in writing at your earliest convenience?

Very truly

Annie Laurie Gaylor

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