

A FULL-COURT (ASSOCIATED) PRESS: CORRECTING THE RECORD ON PPP LOANS

Sports maxims are resounding in my ears lately—"the best **defense** is a good **offense**." In a tight basketball game, assert the "full-court press." A widely circulated **Associated Press** story has caused fervent backlash against the Church. Could this narrative have been anticipated? Quite possibly. Should the Church respond more forcefully? You betcha! If the article caught church leaders (and pastors!) off guard, it was because to our thinking, the relief afforded parishes and schools by the **Payroll Protection Program** was thoroughly vetted and entirely appropriate. The headlines were predictable: "The Catholic Church lobbied for taxpayer funds," or "After lobbying, Catholic Church won \$1.4B in virus aid." The Church "used a special and unprecedented exemption from federal rules..." to procure at least \$1.4 billion in taxpayer-backed coronavirus aid. Special and unprecedented—really? Exemption?

However, this episode at least allows me to offer a fuller explanation. Yes, the Cathedral differs from every other parish in the Archdiocese in that the church, rectory and power plant are owned by the Archdiocese. Still, the parish itself is **civily incorporated** under Minnesota Law as a separate entity, as is every other parish. Due to the historic connection between the old chancery at 244 Dayton Ave. (located on our property) and the Cathedral, they effectively functioned as one entity. Formal and separate incorporation of the parish took place in the 1990's. And here is where the article strayed from the stone-cold facts. The article claims that "Religious groups persuaded the Trump administration to free them from a rule that typically disqualifies an applicant with more than 500 workers."

Whoa—let's break that down. All Cathedral staff are parish employees, except one— me. And no, I am **not employed** by the Archdiocese. Priests are considered self-employed by the IRS for social-security purposes, which is in fact unfavorable to us— the parish does **not pay** half of my FICA! The article insinuates that without this exemption (read: smoke-filled backroom deal!), the Church would not have been eligible for this program. The answer to this claim is simply framed. Since parish employees are **not Archdiocesan employees**, it is not accurate to aggregate all parish employees and treat the Church as one organization. It is true that all parish/school employees are subject to certain **human resources** rules and regulations with respect to **safe environment** requirements, a Code of Ethics, etc. We at the Cathedral could not operate as a parish of the Archdiocese if we did not actively support and implement those policies.

The Archdiocese neither **controls the assets** of the Cathedral parish nor any other. Even parish "closings" are in fact really mergers. If shifting demographics or declining membership make a parish unviable, the **receiving parish** assumes its assets (bank accounts and property), **not** the Archdiocese! I read about one evangelical mega-Church with multiple campuses and 471 employees, that received a PPP loan. But I know of **no single Catholic parish** with anywhere near such a number of employees. Parishes qualify as a "small business" under the definitions of the CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act just as do Protestant congregations or Jewish synagogues that also received aid. Hmmn, did I miss the reference to them in the article? Of course not! The false and convenient narrative is that the Church is one **behemoth organization** with a vast array of satellites completely under its control. The same logic has been employed with regard to the Pope's "control" of dioceses.

Should the Church accept **government aid**? Some say, "Absolutely not!" Seriously? I remember the ink-stamp on my own school math textbook, provided to the school through non-public (i.e. government) aid. Child nutrition programs, administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, are open to participation by private schools. Of the **1,737,297 students** enrolled in U.S. Catholic primary and secondary schools, **198,391** received free or reduced-price lunches. Does any reasonable person believe that this violates the separation of Church and state? Catholic school parents also pay taxes to support the public schools. When in my first parish, to cut costs in a dire situation, I halted our **expensive off-site** catered hot lunch program. It was severely draining our reserves. After all, I had "brown-bagged" it when in school! No big deal, right? Wrong! The subsidies dried up for our neediest families. We quickly pivoted, securing a \$100K donation so that our kitchen could be renovated to code, enabling us to serve on-site. We restarted the program the following fall. Live and learn!

The issues raised in the **sensational** article were misleading at best, especially coming from the historically **objective** Associated Press. True, the Church lobbied to help the government **clarify** how we operate—**not** as a single entity, but as many **individual parishes**, each responsible for its own financial health, while **also** supporting diocesan programs through assessments. In reality, the Catholic Church is the largest non-governmental supplier of social services in the United States. The PPP loan we received came at a critical time to ensure that our valued employees could all be retained. The best defense **is** a good offense. The Church must **respond** to these patently and demonstrably false claims with a vigorous defense.

- A silver lining? Covid-19 protocols will **radically alter** Major League Baseball. Frankly, I consider the truncated 2020 season (played absent fans in the stands) to be little more than an extended spring training, so that players remain in shape for 2021! Hopefully a real season can occur after a vaccine. That said, one of the protocols **forbids** players from **spitting**. Bravo! In baseball, hope springs eternal, so let's hope that this protocol is etched in stone— forever!
- Byzantine church, Roman church, mosque, museum...and now a mosque again? Turkish President Erdoğan wasted just three hours after a court ruling before designating **Hagia Sophia** (built in 537 A.D.) as a mosque. I'll explain at greater length in a **future column**, but this is a **horrible power play** that has lasting ecumenical and inter-religious implications for a UNESCO World Heritage Site.
- Officials believe the fire at **Mission San Gabriel** began in the Choir loft. The cause is under investigation. In preparation for the 250th anniversary of St. Junipero Serra's founding of the mission Sept. 8, 1771, thankfully some historic paintings and artifacts had been removed for restoration. The current church was completed in 1805. The parish has 1220 parishioners and they vow to rebuild.
- A survey in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia indicated that a full 30% of **regular church goers** never attend individual confession. Here, our Cathedral is **truly blessed** with a **robust** attendance that keeps us occupied in the confessional for **at least 90 minutes** every single weekday and Saturday. It is a humble privilege to offer this sacrament. Keep 'em coming!
- Your **profound generosity** has enabled us to significantly close the fiscal year-end Sunday stewardship gap. See the stewardship box (page 4). Envelopes from our mailing are still arriving! Deo gratias.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector