

School-prayer disciples skip vital questions

Until someone complained last year, a recording of Kate Smith's version of The Lord's Prayer was played every morning over the intercom at the Joseph A. Craig Elementary School in New Orleans. As upset as some parents and teachers are about the school's decision to stop Kate's golden voice, I really doubt that any child's spiritual welfare has



Eric Peterson

been harmed by its absence. And it seems unlikely that the Kate Smith recording meant that much to the grade schoolers while it was there. That's one of the major and often unaddressed questions about the school prayer amendment proposal now before Congress. Public observance of non-denominational religious sentiment by its nature tends to be bland and meaningless.

A letter sent to U.S. newspapers by 23 ministers and rabbis asserts that organized prayer in schools reduces the importance of prayer as a religious experience — "bland compromise incantations could trivialize and demean the spiritual significance of

prayer itself."

Although 81 percent of people asked by Gallup last year said they wanted organized prayer in the public schools, it's not clear what kind of prayer they mean, or why it is important. The school prayer issue clearly has become a matter of self-righteous pride for the people who keep pushing it, a way to "bring God back into the schools." And for a president who almost never goes to church, the school prayer amendment is an election-year godsend.

Senate Republican leader Howard Baker of Tennessee has put together a compromise amendment from several proposals in Congress. It would change the Constitution to allow prayer or the notorious "moment of silence" in public classrooms, and allow religious groups to use school facilities. Baker hopes to get the two-thirds majority a constitutional amendment needs to be sent on to the states, and he possibly may; he certainly has Ronald Reagan's support.

"Hasn't something gone haywire," Reagan asked a convention of evangelicals in Columbus, Ohio, recently, "when this great Constitution of ours . . . supposedly prevents our children from Bible study or the saying of a simple prayer in their schools?"

Sen. Lowell Weicker, a Republican from Connecti-

cut and the major opponent of the proposed amendment in Congress, has stressed that the present Supreme Court position, while it has outlawed organized and teacher-led prayers in public schools since 1962, has never stopped children from oral or silent prayers as long as school sessions are not interrupted. And it's hard to see how organized prayer or meditation sessions will strengthen or engender genuine religious feelings in anyone.

The most important reason school prayers in organized form are and should be illegal seldom has been mentioned: that people who don't believe in God or believe differently from most of the other students have every right not to have a rote prayer forced down their throats . . . and the so-called voluntary school prayer is just as much of a forcing as the old mandatory exercise; there is just as much community pressure.

However, the basic emptiness of the whole school prayer idea — the void it creates by its organized and supposedly universal nature — might be more convincing to the people who want the amendment, if they would give it, or something, more than a passing thought.

Short-term sacrifice meaningless

It's been a rough seven days but I'm sure I can make it through the next four and a half weeks. I've given up Catholicism for Lent.

In making this decision, I weighed all those things that are near and dear to me. I thought about giving up horseback riding — which I never do. I thought



Kema Soderberg

about giving up my study habits — of which I have none. I thought about giving up sweet potatoes — which I eat on rare occasions and then only with a quick milk chaser.

Then it hit me: Why don't I give up being something I'm not? Since I'm not Catholic, why go through the motions of observing Catholic tradition?

I'm not implying that it's ludicrous to observe this Catholic Lenten tradition. I've been told that obstinence at this time of year makes up for self-indulgences the rest of the year. I've heard that

denying yourself the things you enjoy is a way of sharing in Christ's suffering.

Surely many Catholics take this seriously. However, it seems that for many people Lent becomes an opportunity to lose some weight or a way to fit in with peers.

One woman told me she used to give up gum every year for Lent. Her friends all gave something up and she thought she should, too. It didn't matter that she never chewed gum.

Lenten promises begin to take on the air of New Year's resolutions. I've given up ice cream three Januarys in a row and never fail to have my first scoop by February.

It seems that many of the things given up for Lent are on the same scale as ice cream. The sacrifices are shelved with the understanding that they can be taken up again in 40 days.

Maybe next year Catholics and non-Catholics can unite and give up something that matters. Could everyone vow to boycott something like petty grievances? Maybe. Forty days isn't too long.

Who knows, maybe we'll like it so much that we will never go back.

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