

HB 205 to help save Catholic schools, won't aid poor kids

Your Turn

Linda Allewalt

Guest columnist

The title of Archbishop Joseph Kurtz's op-ed "Catholic teaching supports the aims of HB 205" should more accurately have stated, "HB 205 supports the aims of Catholic teaching."

Since 1995, the number of Catholic schools in our country has been declining rapidly, mostly due to lower attendance numbers and stretched church budgets. When Mr. Kurtz says, "this legislation will help those in need," he is correct only if he is referring to the need Catholic schools have to basically survive. It has little to do with helping low-income students and more to do with the church counting on the taxpayers of this country to save religious schools.

Poor students are the pawns in the charter school/voucher/tax scholarship game that we have witnessed being played in state after state and potentially on the federal level. While Archbishop Kurtz is certainly entitled to his opinion on this topic, I don't personally think that he has a solid public morality pulpit from which to be lecturing anyone else on what is good for children, educationally or otherwise.

Voucher programs and all the other cousins-in-disguise, like the Scholarship Tax Credit bill in Kentucky, have become a lifeline to private religious schools. Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and many other schools with religious teaching at their core are suddenly flush with tax dollars. Tax dollars with no oversight — the exact opposite of how our government should work.

Florida has a terrible problem with lack of oversight. Hastily set up schools, housed in storefront malls teaching Christian/biblical curriculum have appeared in many places. Their seats are 100 percent filled with tax-credit scholarship students. Almost all the funds from these schemes in Florida, Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana and many other states go to religious schools.

Fancy language dancing aside, we taxpayers are funding religious institutions to a point far beyond any hope of separation of church and state. Mr. Kurtz can evoke Pope Francis' directives all he wishes, but this country was not founded on the Roman Catholic Church's definitions of "inalienable rights" or "the role of government."

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History has shown us what happens to society when religious groups compete for government favors. The public school system was born out of that history and established to avoid religious conflicts in education for the general public. Public schools were purposely founded as secular institutions for good reason.

What the citizens of those states who have fallen for the charter school/voucher/tax credit snake oil claims need to do now is decide just how deeply and how long they wish to fund theocracy.

On the national level, U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos has made it clear over and over again that she intends to continue to make rules that erase former prohibitions against insertions of religion in our public schools. She also will continue to push for use of taxpayer funding of religious schools. She and people like Archbishop Kurtz may not realize this, but as they tie their religious institutions to government, they also lose the protections of separation of church and state.

But then again, I guess the money is more important.

Linda Allewalt is a longtime advocate for separation of church and state. She resides in Shelbyville.