



OPEN LETTER REGARDING RELIGIOUS DISPLAY AT THE COURTHOUSE

December 20, 2016

By fax (318) 627-3527
And by regular mail
Grant Parish Police Jury
200 Main St., Courthouse Building
Colfax, LA 71417

To the Grant Parish Police Jury:

We have learned that the Grant Parish Courthouse grounds currently display a religious nativity scene, without including other holiday symbols. This letter is to advise you that, while your intent may be to commemorate a holiday that many share, the Constitution of this country does not allow such a scene in isolation.

This country is great largely because of our diversity of faiths. No other country has as many faiths as this one, and nowhere in the free world is there so much religious participation. For over two centuries, our religious freedoms have made us the envy of the world.

The Acadian forbears of many Louisianians were exiled from Nova Scotia in part for refusing to convert from Catholicism to the faith of their British conquerors. The descendants of those brave people know better than many the price paid when government insists on adherence to a particular faith.

For that reason, the central role of religion in the lives of many Louisianians deserves protection, regardless of what that religion may be. And for that reason, the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that nativity scenes on public property such as courthouse grounds violate the freedom of religion if they are not accompanied by secular symbols such as reindeer, Santa, menorahs, or similar reminders of the season. See *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668 (1984), *County of Allegheny v. American Civil Liberties Union Greater Pittsburgh Chapter*, 492 U.S. 573 (1989).

Because of the ACLU's dedication to equality for all, we defend religious rights of people of many faiths. We know that the rights of Christians, like those of other religious people, can be easily trampled. If the government can endorse one religion, it can endorse any – and can suppress the freedoms that we all cherish. That is why the government should not support or lend endorsement to the expression of a particular religion, including installing a nativity scene on public land.

Only when government is truly neutral will we all be truly free to exercise our own religions. We urge you, therefore, to modify the scene on the courthouse grounds to respect the law and the rights of all people in Grant Parish.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Marjorie R. Esmán".

Marjorie R. Esmán
Executive Director