

Colorado Springs Diocese supports public school ban on students wearing rosaries

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. - The Diocese of Colorado Springs said it “does not oppose” a decision by some local public schools to ban rosaries from being worn as an accessory on top of students’ clothing.

Although the diocese said it “supports every student’s First Amendment right to openly wear religious jewelry including bracelets, necklaces and rings displaying crosses, crucifixes and other symbols of religious faith,” it acknowledged the right of school districts “to regulate clothing and other items that have been misappropriated as symbols of gang affiliation.”

“Because some gangs in the local area have decided to wear rosaries as jewelry as a symbol of their gang affiliation, the diocese does not oppose the decision by some schools in School District 11 to ask students who choose to wear rosaries to keep them inside their shirts,” the diocese said in an Oct. 12 statement.

Students at Mann Middle School in Colorado Springs were told about the decision in a Sept. 30 memo from school officials: “Students, we need to remind everyone that here at Mann, we respect all religious beliefs. Some members of the Catholic faith are offended by rosaries being worn around the neck like fashion accessories.”

The memo also was sent to their parents. Principal Scott Stanec forwarded it to The Colorado Catholic Herald, newspaper of the Colorado Springs Diocese.

“If you wish to wear a rosary around your neck, it must, out of respect for others, be worn underneath your shirt,” the memo said. It also stated that students who did not follow the directive would be issued a dress-code violation.

Monsignor Ricardo Coronado-Arrascue, diocesan judicial vicar and chancellor, said rosaries and other devotionals are not “meant to be jewelry.”

"It's a reminder of your faith," he told the Herald. "It should also be a way to identify with your faith."

Monsignor Coronado-Arrascue said there are occasions when rosaries may be worn on one's clothes, such as the way Carmelites and Franciscans have a rosary attached to their belt as part of their habit.

He said that he would not take issue with the school's decision "if it's not to suppress any public expression of faith."

"Religious expressions shouldn't be only private because they constitute the core being of one's identity, he said. "It would be unjust to tell the great majority of believers in the world that represent more than three-fourths of the world population to hide their convictions only because those convictions are religious."

Monsignor Coronado-Arrascue told the Herald that the use of religious symbols by gangs is an affront to that faith.

"To belong in a gang is against Catholic teaching because it involves violent confrontation," he said. "To use a Christian symbol to express that is contrary to the symbol and contrary to the faith. Rosaries are many times prayed to obtain peace. How can you wear a symbol of peace and have it represent violence and fighting?"

The American Civil Liberties Union of Colorado, in an Oct. 7 statement, opposed the school's decision "on the basis of religious liberty."

"The First Amendment protects the right of students to express their faith by wearing crosses, rosaries or other religious symbols without interference from school officials," said ACLU legal director Mark Silverstein. "Our Constitution protects the right to individual religious liberty."

L. Martin Nussbaum, an attorney for Rothgerber Johnson & Lyons' Colorado Springs office and an expert in church-state affairs, questioned why Catholics would wear rosaries like necklaces.

"My first concern is that devout Catholics don't wear rosaries as necklaces. I'm not sure who introduced the custom, but it may be (musical artist) Madonna, who

obviously is not interested in promoting true Catholic piety," he said. "If students were wearing crosses as necklaces or other religious signs of other faiths, that obviously would be protected under student expression that the school district shouldn't interfere with.

"If this is not an expression of religious piety but rather group identity, District 11 should have clear rights to regulate such conduct," Nussbaum said.