

‘A Big Win for Religious Liberties’: Supreme Court Unanimously Rules in Favor of Faith

The Supreme Court hasn't always been kind to religious groups this term, but a unanimous ruling handed down Thursday is a different story.

In an unqualified triumph, the Catholic Charities Bureau won the court's support to opt out of Wisconsin's unemployment compensation system – a privilege the state had denied because it deemed the group's work wasn't religious enough, according to The Associated Press.

Even Justice Sonya Sotomayor, a key part of the court's minority liberal wing, wasn't buying that argument. Wisconsin, she wrote, was violating the First Amendment.

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“It is fundamental to our constitutional order that the government maintain ‘neutrality between religion and religion,’” Sotomayor wrote in the conclusion of the ruling.

“There may be hard calls to make in policing that rule, but this is not one.”

Wisconsin claimed Catholic Charities was not exempt from paying into the Badger State's unemployment system because it has been a part of the system for half a century, and because its day-to-day services don't include religious instruction and are not limited to those of the Roman Catholic faith.

As CNN noted, churches are exempt from unemployment taxes, “so

the question for the justices was, in essence, whether religiously affiliated entities that don't perform traditionally religious functions – such as services – should also qualify.”

Catholic Charities, however, argued that its activities “are motivated by religious beliefs and that the state shouldn't be making determinations about what work qualifies as religious,” the AP reported.

The case has national implications, the AP noted, considering the number of major employers, such as hospitals, that have church affiliations.

In a post on the social media platform X, Republican Kentucky State Rep. T.J. Roberts, himself a veteran of religious liberty court battles, called the ruling “A BIG WIN for Religious Liberty.”

The Wisconsin Supreme Court tried to deny Catholic Charities a tax exemption offered to ALL religious institutions because Catholic Charities is willing to provide charity to non-Catholics.

Catholic Charities was represented in the case by the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, a law firm with a history of battling for the rights of religious groups.

In a news release, Becket Vice President and Senior Counsel Eric Rassbach said, “Wisconsin shouldn't have picked this fight in the first place.”

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"It was always absurd to claim that Catholic Charities wasn't religious because it helps everyone, no matter their religion. Today, the Court resoundingly reaffirmed a fundamental truth of our constitutional order: the First Amendment protects all religious beliefs, not just those the government favors."

The Alliance Defending Freedom, another law firm that fights for religious rights, filed a brief in support of Catholic Charities.

In a news release, John Bursch, ADF vice president and senior counsel for appellate advocacy, said that "government has no business second-guessing the way a faith organization lives out its ministry."

"When the government distinguishes among religions based on theological differences in their provision of services, it unconstitutionally entangles church and state – at the expense of ministries that live out their faith, at least in part, through serving their communities," he said.

"Religious ministries that aid a diverse range of people outside their congregations are still engaged in religious activity, and we applaud the court for upholding these core First Amendment freedoms unanimously."

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Thursday's win for the group came after another Catholic entity hoping to establish a publicly funded charter school in Oklahoma ended up on the losing side after the Supreme Court deadlocked in a 4-4 vote.

That left in place an Oklahoma court ruling that prevented the planned St. Isidore of Seville Catholic Virtual School from being approved, according to PBS. The tie vote was possible because Supreme Court Justice Amy Comey Barrett recused herself from the case. She gave no reason for doing so,

according to USA Today.

As the AP reported, a third highly anticipated ruling from the court this term concerns the rights of religious parents when it comes to being allowed to pull their children out of classes that feature sexually charged material.

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