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Ms. Patsy Ray, President  
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**AN OPEN LETTER TO THE COATESVILLE CITY COUNCIL REGARDING  
RECENT PRAYERS AT COUNCIL MEETINGS**

To Council President Ray, Council Vice-President Smith-Dowridge, Council Members,  
and Solicitor Lehr:

The American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania has received several complaints regarding proselytizing and prayer by Council members at recent Coatesville Council meetings. These complaints have come from Coatesville residents and others who attend Council meetings, including Christian clergy.

Coatesville Council members must cease using their elected positions to promote their personal religious views. That is not only the law – which every elected government official has sworn to uphold – but is also the only way to show respect for the beliefs of all Coatesville residents, regardless of religion or creed.

The recent actions and remarks by Coatesville Council members bear no resemblance to the kinds of prayer that have been found acceptable at government meetings. City Council members have led multiple prayers at meetings, have pressured those in attendance to join in, and have used these occasions to promote their personal views of and commitment to specific religious traditions and beliefs. When Ms. Downey urged the Council to refrain from using Council meetings to preach, certain

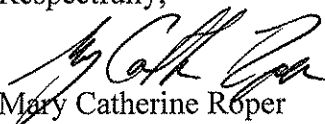
Council members responded that they would never cease proclaiming their faith in Jesus Christ.

No one is asking any Coatesville City Council member to “deny his Savior” or otherwise to refrain from personal religious observance or from preaching in accordance with his or her faith outside Council meetings. The individual expression of faith is protected by the Constitution and is one of the most important freedoms we enjoy in this country. But that freedom of personal religious expression is only possible where the corresponding Constitutional prohibition against government promotion of religion is also respected. That is why the Supreme Court has held that government prayers that affiliate the government with a particular faith violate the First Amendment’s prohibition against the governmental “establishment” of religion.<sup>1</sup>

As Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Conner explained in 2005, “By enforcing the [Constitutional separation between church and state], we have kept religion a matter for the individual conscience, not for the prosecutor or bureaucrat. At a time when we see around the world the violent consequences of the assumption of religious authority by government, Americans may count themselves fortunate: Our regard for constitutional boundaries has protected us from similar travails, while allowing private religious exercise to flourish. ... Those who would renegotiate the boundaries between church and state must therefore answer a difficult question: Why would we trade a system that has served us so well for one that has served others so poorly?”

The American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania requests that the City Council members cease proclaiming their personal religious views at Council meetings and cease using specifically Christian prayers such as The Lord’s Prayer. I request the courtesy of a response to this letter no later than March 19, 2007.

Respectfully,



Mary Catherine Roper

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<sup>1</sup> *County of Allegheny v. ACLU*, 492 U.S. 573, 603 (1989) (“[T]he Court [has] recognized that not even the unique history of legislative prayer can justify contemporary legislative prayers that have the effect of affiliating the government with any one specific faith or belief.”); *Marsh v. Chambers*, 463 U.S. 783, 794-95 (1983) (holding that legislative prayer was acceptable because “there was no indication that the prayer opportunity has been exploited to proselytize or advance any one ... faith or belief”).

cc: Council members by email:

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Ms. Margaret Downey (by email)

Ms. Jennifer Miller (Daily Local) (by email)