

Secularist Crusade Frees Three Municipalities From the Lord's Prayer

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Good unholy Sunday morning, everyone, there was a cross-examination scheduled in December, and a Court hearing in February; they're cancelled. Both have to do with the law, and with lawyers... and lawyers, quite understandably, do not want to see their client's case compromised by some inappropriate revelations.

Over the past months, I would mention, by bits, a crusade against the Lord's Prayer. Today, here is the story.

There is a huge binder filled with newspaper clippings, documents, letters, notes, and as I leaf through them, a message catches my eye. It was posted on the Humanist forum on October 2, 2011.

On the morning of October 1 Bill Broderick, its author, quietly left this world. These are the words from his last message to his fellow Humanists: "It comes to all of us in time. I'm proud to have been of some service to HC and humanism along the way. But the time has come to pass the torch."

Bill and I met at a Humanist forum years ago. We shared the view that humanism was an enlightening philosophy of life. Yet we knew that, as with every light, it had to be shielded from adversary winds, and we also knew that

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— BILL KILPATRICK

we would strive to keep the torch of humanism constantly bright.

Over the years, we would join forces in many fights for what we believed were the right causes. Our last battle together was against the recitation of the Lord's Prayer in public meetings.

The crusade against the Lord's Prayer was initiated by Henry Freitag,

in Penetanguishene. Mr. Freitag argued that the prayer in council meetings was infringing on his rights to freedom of conscience and religion.

In 1999, the Court agreed with him. A similar ruling was pronounced in Quebec, in the case of Payette vs. Laval, in 2006. One could reasonably expect that these rulings would be enforced by the respective Ministers of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

It did not happen and it became increasingly obvious that private citizens would have to come forward and fight for these rulings to be enforced. Bill and I, being residents of Hastings County, would take it upon ourselves to challenge our administrative authorities.

Bill was a man of good will, always looking for conciliatory solutions. In 2007, when he addressed his Council, in Belleville, he said: "Today

I am asking you – very respectfully – as a friend, as a neighbour, as a citizen, and as a non-believer in everything supernatural – to please discontinue your practice of opening your meetings with a prayer. Not only the Lord’s Prayer but all prayers. Opening your meetings with prayer may be a tradition. But surely you can find or invent another tradition – one that doesn’t pander to superstition or discriminates against non-believers.”

Bill left this meeting and lo and behold, the next Council meeting was opened with the Lord’s Prayer, and so would all the meetings that followed.

The following year, I opted for another approach: when I addressed my Council in Maynooth, I said that as a freethinker I felt totally excluded by the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer. To be included as a participant in the Council meetings, I asked to be allowed to say an Atheist Invocation, once or twice a year. The answer from the Council was a resounding NO.

When Secular Ontario offered to provide legal help, I decided to become a plaintiff and take my municipality to court. But prior to that, I wanted to try, once more, to reach my Council through a dialogue of reasoning. I wrote an essay on secularism, had it distributed to the Councilors, and later, on January 26, 2011, I addressed them.

Quoting from my speech, I said, “As a secularist, and as a representative of Secular Ontario, I want to make it very clear, I am here to promote secularism. I am here to promote the separation of Church and State, I am NOT here to advocate the death of religion. I will explain why I formally request that you discontinue saying the Lord’s Prayer ... Today, in the name of Secular Ontario, which wrote to Ontario Municipalities about four years ago, advising them of the illegality of saying the Lord’s Prayer before Council meetings, I ask you to abide by our Charter of Rights and Freedoms.”

What happened next came as a blow to me: a motion was put forward to continue with the prayer, and that motion was approved, with two abstentions.

But I would not give up. There would be more presentations and more face to face meetings, and many more trips, not only to Maynooth and to my neighbouring municipality of Bancroft, but

also to Belleville; indeed, when I learnt that my fellow Humanist, Bill, had to give up the fight due to his declining health, I decided to take over.

Eric Thomas, who had taken over from Bill as President of the local Humanist association, would accompany me to the Council meetings in Belleville. It was precious moral support. In Bancroft, I got help from another Humanist, Bill Kilpatrick, who kindly took upon himself the task of answering the flurry of letters from disgruntled believers, who were hitting our local newspapers with their harsh comments.

Yet, in my own municipality, my mission of good will was getting nowhere and, in March, the Secular Ontario’s lawyer stepped in, with a “cease and desist” letter, sent to the Hastings Highlands Council. The letter was ignored and, in late April, the lawyer was busy with starting court proceedings.

A tentative hearing was arranged for mid-June. However, the lawyers on both sides agreed that more time was needed for further preparation of relevant documents, and the case was put to rest during the summer months.

While the lawyers were enjoying the summer recess, the battle continued to rage in the pages of the local newspapers. One letter writer sent a reminder to his countrymen.

“Let us remember, he wrote, that our national anthem openly asks for God’s help: ‘God keep our land glorious and free. We stand on guard for thee.’ If Secularism or Secular Ontario has their way we will continue to lose more and more of this freedom.”

Another person wrote: “Anti-religion faction threatens legal action against municipal council.”

Yet another described the situation in the following words: “One person or small group should not have the power to hold a council hostage into bending to their will. In this case, Hastings Highlands council has decided to ask for guidance from a higher power in helping them make the correct decisions for the residents that they represent. That a few people are uncomfortable that a council of the people have decided to ask for divine intervention, because they personally disagree with it doesn’t matter.”

To these types of writings, Bill Kilpatrick was firing back lengthy and well-reasoned exposés, allowing from time to time for a pinch of humour:

“It would seem that it is not Dagmar, but Jesus who would like to wipe out the public prayer all together. Perhaps Jesus is using a Secular Humanist to help the Christians become better, more humble Christians.”

From his deathbed in Belleville, Bill Broderick, dispatched another rebuttal, in my defense: “As Ms Gontard-Zelinkova tried to tell her council away back on January 26, secularism is inclusive. It doesn’t divide people. It does not favour one set of beliefs over others. When it comes to politics and public council meetings, it just does the job that it came to do. Why is that so difficult to understand?”

Apart from the battle raging in the pages of the newspapers, there was also some activity within all three councils – in Maynooth, in Bancroft, and in Belleville. Yet none would venture into any decision-making.

On August 19, one newspaper reported about the municipality of Bancroft: “After much discussion about whether or not to continue the tradition of opening council meetings with the Lord’s Prayer, council has decided to take the “wait and see” approach.”

At the end of August, I was facing a dilemma: my municipality had switched from the Lord’s Prayer to so-called generic prayer; challenging that one would be more difficult and costly. What should I do? Continue? Abandon and be satisfied with a partial victory?

My dear friend, Bill Broderick, decided for me, and when I read his message on my screen, tears ran down my cheeks: there was money for me, in his will, and I could use it whenever needed. Nothing was now in my way. I was determined to continue the fight.

On September 29, I was again in Belleville, where I made my presentation before Hastings County council. A few hours later, a QMI Agency came up with the title “Lord’s Prayer off the agenda.” Another article in Belleville’s media, on October 7, came with the title, “Lord’s prayer likely off local council’s agenda.” Then,

on October 28, Belleville’s *Intelligencer* brought another title “Silence is golden at Hastings County Council meetings.”

The last paragraph of the article read: “Mayor Bernice Jenkins of Bancroft challenged a proposed substitute prayer. Her bid for silence went down to defeat on a tie-vote, but won on a recorded second vote which requires a special “weighted” vote system based on number of electors.”

By the end of October, Belleville was prayer-free. On November 8, the Bancroft municipality held its council meeting and the local newspapers reported that, “Council’s members finally resolved the issue of using the Lord’s Prayer to open its meetings. All members voted in favour of starting their meetings with a moment of silence.”

Bancroft municipality was now prayer free.

As for my municipality of Hastings Highlands, we will never know what the councilors had to say or how they voted; indeed, debates were kept away from the public, the issue had been discussed during In-Camera Sessions.

However, on 8 November 2011, the lawyer of the opposing party notified our lawyer that the municipality of Hastings Highlands was changing its by-law procedure in order to have the prayer replaced by a moment of silence.

The court case had been scheduled for February 15, 2012.

Our lawyer was left with the last task: to secure a court order to close out the case.

The fight was over.

There’s that warm feeling of having been part of a team and having the job done. I know that without the support of Secular Ontario and my fellow Humanists, in Bancroft and Belleville, nothing would have been achieved.

My special thought goes to Bill Broderick. During my life, I’ve been part of a number of teams and fought for various causes. Victory was not always at the end. Yet, whether we won or lost, we were together to celebrate or to support and encourage each other.

In this recent fight, our comrade, Bill Broderick, fell, so close to the finish line.

As I close the binder, I whisper: Rest in peace, dear Friend. The torch is burning bright. When the time comes, I too will pass it on.