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A Woman's Irk is Never Done: An IRS Stew

by Kimberly Gadette

Delete those email jokes disparaging the Iraq war! Hide that picture of Cheney morphing into Danny DeVito as The Penguin! And for heaven's sake (literally), forget about claiming write-offs to any churches even slightly to the left of the far, far right. It's not Santa who's making a list and checking it twice ... it's the IRS. Those Gee-guys, that right arm of the wrong end of the stick, that cozy institution that first came into being because Abraham Lincoln needed money to wage the Civil War. With an ink-stained finger, the IRS might be pointing at you next.

But currently, it's got its hands full with a whole lot of saints. "All Saints," as a matter of fact, an Episcopal church in Pasadena, California. I wonder if the treatment would have been worse if the Church had been called "A Modicum of Miscreants?" "A Fistful of Fallen?" After going after Al Capone in 1931, the Department of Internal Revenue is now turning its bloodshot eye on All Saints. First a gangland mobster, now a liberal activist church. Who says the IRS is a few thousand entries short of a balanced ledger? No, honestly—who's saying that? We'll need names and addresses.

Being that the devil's in the details, here's the story: Last June, a liberal, self-proclaimed "peace and justice" Episcopal church in Pasadena, California had been notified by the Department of the Treasury that the IRS intended to conduct an examination for possible violation of its non-profit status. The letter cited the reason for the examination was the fact that All Saints' Rector Emeritus, Reverend Doctor George F. Regas, had delivered a speech two days before the 2004 Presidential election examining the moral implications of the Iraq war. The IRS stated that the sermon may have contained "implicit" intervention in the election because it contained references to Bush's and Kerry's positions on certain moral issues, and that the Church had reminded the congregation the need to consider their values when voting.

The letter went on to state, "a reasonable belief exists that you may not be tax-exempt as a church ..." "The federal tax code prohibits tax-exempt organizations, including churches, from intervening in political campaigns and elections."

Retired as Rector of All Saints in 1995, and merely acting as a guest speaker, Rev. Regas stated that he did not tell the congregation how to vote. His words: "When you go into the voting booth on Tuesday, take with you all that you know about Jesus, the peacemaker. Take all that Jesus means to you. Then vote your deepest values."

A Washington, DC law firm specializing in tax exemption law and first amendment rights answered the letter, stating, "The Church does not believe the law requires

it to preview or edit every guests remarks – much less mandate that a preacher's sermons may not discuss moral values ... It seems ludicrous to suggest that a pastor cannot preach about the value of promoting peace simply because the nation happens to be at war during an election season."

The IRS responded by offering a deal: If All Saints would admit to wrongdoing, the IRS would go away. (I wonder if the guy who offered this deal had a hoarse voice, and said anything about a cement overcoat.) In any event, All Saints refused, and just a few weeks ago, decided to take the matter to its congregation and the national press.

This is a church that openly welcomes gay congregants. It employs female ministers. For the last 17 years, All Saints has sponsored a highly-publicized, well-attended, candlelit walk through Pasadena in early December called "The Posada" in order to raise monies and awareness for AIDS. Founded in 1882, this church is known for its commitment to social justice.

On a personal note, I've had the good fortune to hear sermons delivered by Rev. Regas and the current rector, Reverend J. Edwin Bacon. My impressions are of extraordinarily bright, impassioned men who speak from their hearts, urging their congregation to truly exercise compassion and charity towards all. These pastors, this church, seems to honestly practice exactly what it preaches, welcoming and loving to all peoples of all religions.

So was it the virtual love beads around the Reverend's neck that ticked the Treasury off?

The concept of Rev. Regas' speech, titled "If Jesus Debated Senator Kerry and President Bush," was that Jesus was confronting both Kerry and Bush, reminding them both about the sins of war and poverty. That was it. No fatwas on foreign leaders, like Pat Robertson. No blaming feminists, gays or lesbians for the fall of the Twin Towers, like Jerry Falwell. Funny, but Messrs. Robertson and Falwell have yet to receive their letters from the IRS. Damn that Christmas mail.

Rev. Regas told us what he thought Jesus would say. But what would Joseph say? Uh, no, not Joseph of Nazareth.

Joseph of McCarthy.