Covid Double Standards

Looters run wild; parishioners stay home.

By James Freeman
June 4, 2020

“Clever Churchgoers Avoid Arrest By Disguising Themselves As Rioters,” says a recent headline on the satirical website Babylon Bee. Life may soon be imitating art if leftist governors and mayors persist in enforcing appalling double standards when it comes to social distancing.

On Wednesday the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty and two law firms sent a letter to Madison, Wisconsin Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway and Dane County Executive Joe Parisi on behalf of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Madison. The problem is that the city and county have collaborated on a discriminatory public health order capping in-person worship at just 50 people. According to Becket, “Under the order, shopping malls, bars, restaurants, spas, gyms, salons, museums, movie theaters, community centers, bowling alleys, skating rinks, trampoline parks and more are not subject to the 50-person cap. Madison’s mayor has also announced that public protests are not subject to government restrictions at all.”

It’s not just that citizens should be free to enjoy their basic liberties whether kneeling in protest or in prayer. The so-called government in Madison has been allowing just about everything except religious exercise. A team of reporters at the Wisconsin State Journal noted the consequences on Wednesday:

For three nights, business on and around State Street in Downtown Madison have been sitting ducks for those who have taken advantage of the uproar over the killing of George Floyd to vandalize and steal their property. Almost every business on the street, from
new ventures to those that have been around for decades, has been hit by graffiti, broken
windows or looting. Above most of these properties are apartments occupied by
residents, many of them terrified of what the nightly raids might bring.

This week’s damage could not have been a surprise to the mayor. According to a report
last weekend from Wisconsin Public Radio:

Starting around noon Saturday, about 2,000 people gathered near the state Capitol in
Madison, with protesters holding signs and speakers denouncing police violence and
racism. Traffic was blocked as the group moved along city streets. Likewise, hundreds
gathered and marched through downtown Milwaukee for the second straight day.

By Saturday evening, what began as a day of peaceful protest turned into a chaotic scene
in Madison. Police in riot gear fired tear gas and clashed with roughly 150 protesters who
threw objects like rocks, chairs and water bottles, broke store windows, looted businesses
and started fires along State Street.

But if any houses of worship are thinking of holding traditional services, local
bureaucrats are on the case threatening fines.

This type of abuse of local political power is not limited to Wisconsin. The Forward’s
Aiden Pink noted this week:

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said Tuesday that he still supported quarantine
measures that limited attendance at houses of worship to 10, even as he supported mass
protests in the city against police brutality.

This column will go out on a limb and suggest that political agendas are influencing the
rules allegedly enacted to protect public health. The overt discrimination against
religious exercise in Madison and New York City seems ideological, but often the rules
seem designed more for political expediency. In states like New Jersey liquor stores are
deemed essential by government but youth sports have been forbidden. This column of
course has no quarrel with the former decision, only the latter.

Everyone should have a quarrel with politicians selectively enforcing limits on social
gatherings depending on the beliefs and the speech of participants.

Everyone should also have a quarrel with the limits themselves. In Wisconsin as in the
rest of the country, Covid has never become the hospital-overwhelming catastrophe that
many feared.