

Church and state and the Fourth Estate

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Page: 16
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I knew **the** story might raise a few hackles. Stories involving religion often do. Especially when they focus on something other than **the** celebration of faith.

So I wasn't surprised to hear from more than one reader on **the** subject of a story that ran last week on **the** continuing legal troubles of former priest Mark Campobello, who is accused of molesting a 14-year-old parishioner four years ago while he was working at St. Peter Catholic **Church** in Geneva.

We had written a number of stories on Campobello, but this one focused on **the** tug of war that is being played between **the** Catholic **Church** and **the** Kane County **state's** attorney's office.

Readers took umbrage with our placement of **the** story across **the** top of Page 1, along with "biased" language and descriptors that made **the** church sound mysterious.

Allow me to address your concerns, because I imagine there are plenty of other good Catholics out there with knitted brows over this.

In short, **the** Catholic **Church** did an internal investigation of Campobello. It interviewed people, it took notes, it made a report. And **the** results of that investigation sit in a locked box somewhere in **the** office of **the** church's Rockford Diocese.

The **state's** attorney's office wants to get its hands on **the** church's investigation. It views it as evidence. And **the** church's attorney views that as privileged information - **the** private business of **the** church.

I hold **the** separation of church and state no less sacred than **the** right to free speech, which allows me to write this unfettered by anyone but perhaps **the** editorial page editor.

But when issues like separation of church and state arise - and I thought this was a compelling example of how those two interests sometimes clash - it is news. Big news.

I think we can agree that whether **the** church is forced to turn this information over or is allowed to keep its investigation private could have a much broader effect on such church/state matters than just this case.

Hence, **the** play on Page 1.

If you read that day's paper, you would have found inside **the** story of a Navy man stationed at Great Lakes Naval Training Center who is charged with soliciting a child for sex.

Police say he talked with someone he thought was a 14-year-old girl over **the** Internet and arranged to meet her for sex. Turns out it was an Internet task force cop posing as a child.

We explored **the** same types of issues in this story, trying to learn how military justice would figure in and whether it would have any effect on his criminal case in Kane County.

As for **the** concern that we used inflammatory language that painted **the church** in a bad light? Well, **the** inner workings of **the church** - and **the** fact that it conducts quasi-legal investigations - is intriguing to most lay people and non-Catholics. It was to me.

And **the** characterization that **the** evidence sits in a locked box in **the** diocese office? It is a storytelling device we employed, but one we got from court.

When you call to complain to a newspaper editor, we usually are pretty quick with answers. That's because we try to think these things out before we put stories in **the** paper. Justification, fairness and balance are all things we put a check mark next to before we send a story on to **the** copy desk.

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