

First Liberty Institute Urges U.S. Supreme Court to Reverse

Puerto Rico Court Decision Threatening Church, Religious Freedom

Group files response brief on behalf of religious schools in support of writ of Certiorari in case where court interfered with church autonomy, governance

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Today, attorneys with First Liberty Institute filed a brief with the Supreme Court of the United States on behalf of two Catholic schools responding in support of a petition filed last month by the Archdiocese of San Juan, Puerto Rico. The Archdiocese has asked the Justices to reverse a decision by the Supreme Court of Puerto Rico that overrides the long-standing structure of Catholic churches and schools.

A copy of the brief can be found [here](#).

“If a court can tell a church or school how to operate, it’s only a matter of time until government is telling churches what to believe,” said Kelly Shackelford, President, Chief Counsel, and CEO of First Liberty. “We are asking for the U.S. Supreme Court to simply apply the clear purpose of the First Amendment and more than 100 years of its own precedent. The Justices should restore the freedom of churches in Puerto Rico to operate free of government interference.”

First Liberty represents two parochial schools in Puerto Rico. In 2016, former employees of various Catholic schools brought suit against a number of parties, including the two schools. On appeal, the Puerto Rico Supreme Court upheld a lower court’s decision finding that individual Catholic churches and schools don’t exist as independent, legal entities, despite one of the schools, Academia del Perpetuo Socorro, holding its own corporate certificate since 1968. Instead, the court deemed all Catholic entities in Puerto Rico jointly liable for claims against the “Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church in Puerto Rico,” an entity that doesn’t exist.

In its brief, First Liberty argues, “[T]he Supreme Court has applied the First Amendment to protect religious congregations’ ability to maintain their governing structures free from state interference. The Puerto Rico Supreme Court’s finding that Catholic churches and affiliated entities lack legal personalities of their own ... devastates the Catholic faith’s ability to determine its ecclesiastical government...” Adding, “By assigning legal personality to an entity that does not exist within the Catholic Church’s polity while dissolving the legal personalities of entities that do exist within that structure, the decision below destroys the hierarchical polity governing Catholic churches and other Catholic entities throughout Puerto Rico.”

The case is *Roman Catholic Archdiocese of San Juan, Puerto Rico, et al. v. Yalí Acevedo Feliciano, Sonia Arroyo Velázquez, Elsie Alvarado Rivera, et al.* (Supreme Court docket number 18-921).

###

About First Liberty Institute

[First Liberty Institute](#) is a non-profit public interest law firm and the largest legal organization in the nation dedicated exclusively to defending religious freedom for all Americans.

To arrange an interview, contact Lacey McNeil at media@firstliberty.org or by calling 972-941-4453.