

Pennsylvania Catholic bishop criticized for Hitler comment

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HARRISBURG, Pa. (RNS) The bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Harrisburg, Pa., is being criticized for saying Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini would love the country's public school system because it teaches all children one set of beliefs.

Bishop Joseph P. McFadden made the remark while advocating for school vouchers during a televised interview last week.

"In totalitarian governments, they would love our system," McFadden said. "This is what Hitler and Mussolini and all those tried to establish: a monolith so all the children would be educated in one set of beliefs and one way of doing things."

McFadden's words sparked outrage from the area chapter of the Anti-Defamation League and a rebuke from the legislative director of the ACLU of Pennsylvania.

In an email sent to The Patriot-News on Wednesday (Jan. 25), McFadden said he didn't mean to cause offense and that he was not trying to trivialize the Holocaust.

"The reference to dictators and totalitarian governments of the 20th century, which I made in an interview on the topic of school choice, was to make a dramatic illustration of how these unchecked monolithic governments of the past used schools to curtail the primary responsibility of the parent in the education of their children," McFadden said.

"Today many parents in our state experience the same lack of freedom in choosing an education that best suits their child as those parents oppressed by dictators of the past. I intentionally did not make reference to the Holocaust in my remarks," he said.

ADL regional director Barry Morrison said McFadden's remarks are offensive to people who suffered through the Holocaust or fought fascism.

"We appreciate his commitment to the education of children and the viability of Catholic schools," Morrison said. "However, he should not be making his point at the expense of the memory of six million Jews and millions of others who perished in the Holocaust."

Andy Hoover, legislative director of the ACLU of Pennsylvania, said that while everyone makes mistakes, McFadden's remarks were "completely inappropriate."

Besides, public schools are diverse, not monolithic, Hoover said.

"Sure, there are standards that are set by the state, but everything is done in an open, public process and is checked by the political system," he said. "School boards are elected, the people from the Department of Education work for the governor. So, our public school system is actually very democratic and very open."