

I drive a lot. I also pass St. Gregory the Great on highway 278 a lot and, at times, have had to stop and wait for literally hundreds of cars and thousands of people entering or exiting that church's massive parking lot.



It has always made me think they should rename it St Gregory the Extraordinary; for this place, and the thousands who go to it, must surely be reflective of the still-growing importance of spirituality in America (a stark contrast to Europe where churches often are more like relics and museums as opposed to being vibrant centers for communities of people desirous of expressing their freedom and their spiritual beliefs).

A rezoning request, to mitigate the challenges placed on both St. Gregory and on the general community by the church's phenomenal success, is therefore something that needs to be dealt with by the County Council on the basis of what it is: A rezoning request.

Thus, for a member of that Council to introduce her personal beliefs and values, along with her personal biases about others' beliefs and values, is not just inappropriate; it is irresponsible. Laura Von Harten is my writing colleague in this paper. Discussing and debating "smart growth" with her is enlightening and helpful. Expecting her to serve the constituents who elected her is normal. Challenging her when and if she breaks any promises she made to those who elected her is fair game.

But, in her comments about the Catholic Church she has crossed the line. Her elective office is not intended as a soapbox for her prejudices. It is not intended as a place for proselytizing the "freedom of conscience" that's a tenet of her Unitarian Universalist practice. You don't validate the tenet of one faith while denigrating the tenet of another. That is not American freedom; that is personal arrogance.

She is defending herself on the issue at hand in the ways that she sees fit and, whatever the outcome, this is no-one else's fault but her own. Her decision to recuse herself from voting was a smart step, but, in my view, recusal as an after-thought is nothing but self-protection.

The brave, honest and ethical thing to have done would have been recusal before dropping her bomb, with a comment to the press simply stating something like "my personal beliefs prevent me from addressing this issue in an unbiased manner and in the interest of the public I serve, I recuse myself from the discussion and any ensuing vote."

Had she done that, there would not have been calls for her resignation; there would not have had to be reprimands from the Council Chairman and there would not have had to be so many hurt feelings. There might even have been that wonderful act called "forgiveness." Amazing what happens when unexpected prejudice meets shocked outrage.

Another More Seasonal Statement:

As the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas is again upon us and, as that time, this time, is couched in economic uncertainty, a suggestion from this correspondent: Make this the year we buy our presents for each other from the local merchants of Beaufort County.

From Bay Street to Port Royal; on Lady's island and St-Helena, in Bluffton, Hilton Head and Okatie these merchants are our neighbors. In their bookstores, art galleries, clothing boutiques, specialty shops, crafts counters and restaurants, they have creative, worthy, properly-priced choices to make the season bright.

None of them has asked me to do this. But so many of them sustain this paper, "The Lowcountry." They support its existence and growth. Maybe we, as its readers and writers, can

do the same for them.