News



Carol Zimmermann

View Author Profile



Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Washington — November 5, 2018

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The Supreme Court announced Nov. 2 that it would hear oral arguments this term to consider if a 40-foot cross in Maryland endorses religion or is simply a secular memorial.

The cross in question sits at a busy intersection in the Washington suburb of Bladensburg, Maryland, and memorializes soldiers who died in World War I.

Last year, the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals based in Richmond, Virginia, ruled 2-1 that the 93-year-old monument is unconstitutional and must be removed or destroyed. "(It) has the primary effect of endorsing religion and excessively entangles the government in religion."

Known as the Bladensburg Cross or the Peace Cross, the cement and marble memorial was erected by the Snyder-Farmer Post of the American Legion of

Hyattsville, Maryland, to recall the 49 men of Prince George's County who died in World War I. The cross, whose construction was funded by local families, was dedicated July 13, 1925.

The American Humanist Association, a Washington-based group that represents atheists and others, filed suit against the memorial because it is in the shape of a cross. It argued that having a religious symbol on government property violates the establishment clause of the First Amendment.

The group said the cross "discriminates against patriotic soldiers who are not Christian, sending a callous message to non-Christians that Christians are worthy of veneration while they may as well be forgotten."

Supporters of the Peace Cross stress that its message is secular: to commemorate war victims. They also have argued that the monument's cross shape was not intended for religious reasons but to look similar to cross-shaped grave markers in Europe used for American soldiers who died there.

Advertisement

This is not the first time the highest court has considered the status of religious monuments on public land. In 2005 it defended a Ten Commandments monument on the property of the Texas Capitol, noting that its religious message was part of a secular display.

In 2009, the court ruled that it was constitutional for the federal government to permit a large cross to stay within the boundaries of a national preserve in the California desert, but because the case also involved the transfer of ownership of a small plot of federal land, the high court sent it back to lower courts for further consideration. In 2012, a federal judge approved a settlement on the transfer issue allowing the cross to remain.

How the Supreme Court rules on this Peace Cross case could impact similar monuments, including crosses at Arlington National Cemetery, the military cemetery in Arlington, Virginia.

Arguments in this case are expected before the end of the year.