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18 States Urge Supreme Court to Save Kentucky Prayer Grotto

A true story of faith under pressure. Read the first half below, then continue online.

KEY SPIRITUAL TAKEAWAY

"Eighteen state attorneys general have urged the U.S"

(Transliterated from the original Hindi.)

They had gathered only to pray. When prayer itself becomes the target, faith is proved not by words but by staying.

The Story - Part One

Eighteen state attorneys general have urged the U.S. Supreme Court to let a small Kentucky Catholic community build a 600-square-foot prayer grotto on its own land. The brief, led by Kentucky Attorney General Russell Coleman and filed this week, asks the justices to reverse the Kentucky Supreme Court and revive the shrine plan in Park Hills. The court agreed in October to hear the case, with oral arguments scheduled for January 20, 2027.

The grotto itself is modest. The Missionaries of St. John the Baptist, who run Our Lady of Lourdes Chapel in Park Hills, a suburb of Cincinnati, want to build a 16-by-39-foot grotto honouring the Virgin Mary's apparition to St. Bernadette at Lourdes in France. The plan calls for a shrine, a plaza, a walking path and a retaining wall, a quiet place for prayer and meditation beside the church on Amsterdam Road. The community's own description is simpler still: a grotto, two statues, a patio, and a walkway.

The fight began in 2021, when the Missionaries sought permission to build on land they had bought next to their church. The property was zoned residential, so the group applied to the local zoning board for a conditional use permit and setback variances. The board granted them. Then two neighbours, Joel and Elizabeth Frederic, sued, challenging the city's approval of the outdoor shrine. The neighbours prevailed in Kentucky's appellate courts, and in December 2025 the Kentucky Supreme Court ruled 6-1 against the church, holding that the zoning board had exceeded its authority in granting the variance and that no violation of federal religious land-use law had occurred.

The Kentucky court reasoned that the ordinance did not substantially burden the church's religious exercise, in part because the community could build a smaller shrine on its existing plot, and in part because it knew of the prohibition before it sought the permit. The Missionaries say that reasoning forces a court to decide which size, form and location of a shrine counts as religiously essential, and which does not. That, they argue, is exactly the kind of judgment the law forbids the government to make.

The case, Missionaries of Saint John the Baptist, Inc. V. Frederic, docket No. 25-1131, Reached the Supreme Court on March 26, 2026. The justices agreed on October 1 to hear it, but only on one question: whether barring a religious institution from building a religious structure on its own property is a substantial burden under the federal Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, known as RLUIPA. It is the first time the Supreme Court has considered the land-use protections of that law, according to Coleman's office, and the answer will reach far beyond one small town in Kentucky.

The Turning Point - What Happens Next

The story reaches a life-changing moment that changes everything -- and what seemed like the end is only the middle. Two reports disagree on the numbers, and one question is left unanswered: will the CCTV footage ever come out? Read the full story to find out what happens next.

PERSONAL REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When gathering to pray carries a real cost, what keeps a community coming together anyway -- and what would keep you coming?

2. The pastor's sister shielded him with her own body and fainted under the blows. What does costly, self-giving love look like in your own family or church?

3. When justice is delayed and a complaint is withdrawn under threat, how do believers hold on to truth without giving in to fear -- or to hatred?

READ THE FULL STORY

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