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Five Crucial Cases Gorsuch Will Help Decide

New Supreme Court justice becomes key vote on religious liberty, immigration and more

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Neil Gorsuch was sworn in as the Supreme Court's long-awaited ninth justice at roughly 11 a.m. on Monday morning — now he will jump immediately into the legal fray on a slew of consequential upcoming cases.

Here are several of the most important cases to be heard in the next year, in which his fifth vote could flip what could otherwise have been a 4-4 decision:

Trinity Lutheran Church of Columbia v. Comer

Gorsuch will hear this case's oral arguments on April 19, just a little over a week after he is sworn in. This is the last major case the court will consider before the 2016-2017 term ends.

The Missouri Department of Natural Resources (DNR) awarded grants to non-profit organizations so they could participate in its Playground Scrap Tire Surface Materials Grant Program. But when Trinity Lutheran Church's daycare and preschool center applied for a grant, the DNR denied its request, saying that the state's constitution prohibited it from allocating grants to religiously affiliated organizations.

Trinity's case was taken up by the Alliance Defending Freedom, which claimed that the DNR's refusal violated the Constitution. The Supreme Court agreed to consider the case beginning on April 19.

“Seeking to protect children from harm while they play tag and go down the slide is about as far from an ‘essentially religious endeavor’ as one can get,” the ADF's petition read. “The DNR's religious exclusion sends a message that Trinity's children are less worthy of protection simply because they play on a playground owned by a church. This is not a mild disapproval of religion.”

Ilya Shapiro, the editor-in-chief of the Cato Supreme Court Review at the Cato Institute, told Fox Business: “Based on how solicitous Judge Gorsuch has been of religious liberty, I would expect him to side with the church.”

Maslenjak v. U.S.

This case, which is the Supreme Court's last scheduled hearing of this term, revolves around Divna Maslenjak — a woman from Serbia who lived in Ohio and lied about why she came to the U.S. Maslenjak was later stripped of her U.S. citizenship when her deception came to light.

The Supreme Court takes this case up from the 6th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals, which determined that a naturalized U.S. citizen could lose his or her citizenship under specific criminal circumstances, such as issuing falsified statements.

Hernández v. Mesa

Although the Supreme Court has already heard oral arguments in this case, no ruling has yet been reached. Gorsuch may be called upon to aid in a subsequent ruling if Chief Justice John Roberts orders the case to be re-argued, CNN noted.

This case involves the 2010 death of Sergio Hernández, a 15-year-old Mexican immigrant shot and killed by a Border Patrol agent after crossing the border into the U.S. The teen's family wishes to sue the agent for allegedly violating their unarmed son's constitutional rights. The eight Supreme Court justices failed to reach an agreement on the many issues surrounding this case, and it may come up for reconsideration now that the ninth justice has been confirmed.

Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission

The Supreme Court justices will decide during their meeting Thursday whether they'll consider this religious-liberty case this term or at all. The case involves a baker in Colorado who declined to make a wedding cake for a same-sex couple. Shop owner Jack Phillips told the couple he could not comply with their request for religious reasons. The lower courts ruled in favor of the same-sex couple after they filed a lawsuit alleging that Phillips had violated the Colorado Anti-Discrimination Act.

"This is not about the people who asked for a cake, it's about the message the cake communicates," ADF-allied attorney Nicolle Martin, a co-counsel in the case, said in June 2016, according to the ADF. "No artist should be punished for declining to promote ideas or participate in events when they disagree with the message communicated."

Peruta v. San Diego

On Thursday, the Supreme Court will also decide whether or not it will consider this Second Amendment case. An initial ruling in the case said the Second Amendment allows citizens to carry firearms in a public setting. But when the case was reheard, gun-rights advocates were incensed when the court ruled that California gun owners must display "good cause" for why they should be allowed to obtain a concealed carry permit to carry in public. That ruling stated that "there is no Second Amendment right for members of the general public to carry concealed firearms in public."

As The Los Angeles Times noted in an article published Sunday, "County sheriffs enforce this policy, and in San Diego, Los Angeles and other urban counties, permits are rarely granted. In San Diego, for example, officials have taken the position that simply fearing for one's personal safety is not enough to demonstrate 'good cause.'"

But gun-rights advocates have fiercely opposed this ruling, maintaining that U.S. citizens have the constitutional right to "bear arms." And now the Supreme Court will weigh whether or not to issue a ruling on this case this week. UCLA law professor Adam Winkler told the LA Times that this "could be the most important Second Amendment case since D.C. vs. Heller."