

Catholics at the Capitol

Living Faith in the Public Square

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Keynote Address: "Religion in the Public Square"

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I am proud to be addressing you this morning as the archbishop of Milwaukee. I am proud to be a Catholic at the Capitol, and I am proud to be a citizen of the state of Wisconsin. We come together because we love our Lord, our Church and our State. Together, we can celebrate the historic accomplishment of our Catholic Church in the development of the state of Wisconsin, to witness our commitment to fulfill our obligation to live our faith, as taught by Jesus and his Church, and to pledge our efforts to shape the future of our state in seeking the well being of all our brothers and sisters in serving the common good. We come together to lend our voice, vision and heart in shaping our society. But, first think of the legacy the Church has contributed to our state.

Imagine what we would look like as a society, if it had not been for the contributions of our religious sisters and brothers who educated the children in our rural and underdeveloped urban areas. They gave their lives so that our great-grandparents, grandparents and parents could receive an education in order to be productive members of our society. Today, over 60,000 students attend Catholic primary and secondary schools. In addition, our Catholic colleges and universities offer graduate and post-graduate degrees serving the entire state.

Health care, in many of the areas of our state, was served by the religious communities who established hospitals and clinics in order to serve the health needs of our population. For some rural farming areas, it was the Catholic hospital that served as its only source of health care. Today, one out of three patients in the state of Wisconsin is served by Catholic health care facilities.

Led by their pastors, the parish structure in many of our small farming towns and urban areas provided community support to the growing immigrants who settled from Germany, Poland, Ireland or Italy. They preserved their customs and gave voice to their needs as they integrated into the community. Today, the pastors and ministerial staff of our parishes continue to be the voice of the immigrant Hispanic and Asian populations preserving their customs and assisting in the integration of this struggling community.

For decades, the economically deprived in many of our areas found support in and through their local parish communities, and I know that many of you have served assisting the poor and needy through your confirmation projects, youth group ministries, social concerns committees and Vincent de Paul societies of your parishes.

Catholic Charities has existed in every one of our dioceses throughout the state reaching out to those in need, to the homeless, the addicted, those reestablishing themselves in our communities who have been incarcerated and are seeking a second chance. This is a Gospel mandate, which is our faith in action.

As a Church, we have fought for the respect of laborers and the safety in the workplace. We added our voices to those who have supported the abolition of the death penalty. We have trumpeted the recognition of marriage as one man and one woman.

The dignity of human life has been taught, promoted and defended by the Catholic Church and other numerous groups that seek the elimination of abortion and the protection of human life from conception to natural death.

We realize that we are in a period where issues divide many of us. The ability for civil discourse in a climate of mutual respect seems to be, at best, strained. Our state is hurting. Our people are divided. Our leaders seem to be reluctant to listen to one another. We are not assigning blame or taking sides, but we are here to help with the healing to lend our voice, our vision and our heart to our government and its leaders to be a witness of the hope offered by those who serve Christ and his Church.

Even though we here this day are of one faith, we know that we can honestly disagree in our approaches to some of our political views and debate the best course of action to achieve a common solution to the problems facing us as a community. But, we need to be together in our resolve to have our state succeed in serving the common good. Some here today are republicans, some democrats some independents, some liberal, some conservative, some moderate, but today our differences should be placed aside so that together we might offer a message of hope which comes from our faith. We are not ideologues who attempt to achieve our goals through any means possible. We are people who are committed to a person - Jesus Christ, and it is he and his Church, in its teachings, that inform and form our consciences and direct our actions toward the good so that we, as citizens of this great state and nation, can exercise our freedom to make our positions known with a sense of respect.

Our Church's teaching offers us insight into our human nature. We all seek happiness.

Even in our country's Declaration of Independence, there is recognition of that pursuit: "We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." But, there are two obstacles in obtaining true happiness and we must be aware of them. One is human frailty, which is ignorance of the truth about who we are and what we are created for. We choose ends that we believe will make us happy, but are often mistaken since they are not in line with our true nature. And, second is human selfishness: a rejection of anything which is not self-serving. I choose goods in a way that selfishly excludes the rights of others or which ignores my duties toward them. As a Church, we understand that no one knows the human heart like Jesus. This is the specialty of his Church - true knowledge of the human nature which lights the path to authentic fulfillment and fruitfulness. The Church's moral social teachings have served as guideline for political action throughout the world. But, we must listen. Let me offer a few examples of when the Church has placed its teachings before the world that was reluctant to listen.

In 1891, Leo the XIII wrote the famous encyclical called "Rerum Novarum" (On new Things). Most remember the teaching as establishing the rights of workers and for a just wage. However, in this same encyclical, Leo explained why Communism was evil and destructive - Communism neglected the spiritual concern for the individual. The world failed to listen. Twenty-six years later, the Communists sparked the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, paving the way for some of history's greatest injustices, mass murders, denial of religious freedom and the suppression of free speech.

In 1937, Pope Pius the XI wrote an encyclical "Mit Brennender Sorge" (With Deep Concern). He reiterated his condemnation of Nazi ideology and warned of the injustices that would come if that ideology was unchecked. Again, the world and many Catholics failed to listen, and appeased Hitler. Eighteen months later, World War II began and we all know of the horrors of that war.

For his entire pontificate, John Paul the II warned western civilization about the dangers of materialism, consumerism and moral relativism. If we continue to embrace a sense of self-gratification without recognizing our responsibilities to our brothers and sisters we would face, not only the loss of our ethical principles, but also the very spirit of a just society. We can easily view how self-interest has been a divisive factor in arriving at equitable agreement in the political process.

Today, the voice of the Church is still loud and clear. Our current pontiff, Pope Benedict XVI, has offered his pastoral insights in "Deus Caritas Est." The pope challenged political leaders to realize that their main purpose is to maximize justice in society.

“Politicians need the light of divine revelation to fulfill this task of maximizing justice.” As Benedict says, “Justice is both the aim and the intrinsic criterion of all politics.” Politics are more than mere mechanisms for defining the rules of public life: its origin and its goal are found in justice which, by its very nature, has to do with ethics. The state must inevitably face the question of how justice can be achieved here and now. But, this presupposes an even more radical question - what is justice? “The problem is one of practical reason; but if reason is to be exercised properly, it must undergo constant purification since it can never be completely free of the danger of a certain ethical blindness caused by the dazzling effect of power and special interests.” The words of Jesus, who came to heal and to save, guide our understanding of current events through the Church’s official teaching. We can’t predict future events. We don’t have some magical crystal ball, but we can speak the truth on human behavior, interaction and decision-making on social issues this enables the Church to identify destructive social trends and false teachings. This is part of the gift God has given us through the Church and in which we as the Church’s faithful and loyal citizens share. We are not angels and the Church’s social teaching is argued not from some ethereal position, but on the basis of reason and natural law. The moral teaching of the Church offers hope because it is founded in faith and reason.

In his second encyclical “Spe Salvi,” Benedict recalls that at a number of places in sacred Scripture the words faith and hope are used interchangeably. First, our hope is grounded in our conviction that something better awaits us and this makes a difference in our lives. One who has hope lives differently. Second, our hope in the future changes the present because we have hope. We have an impact on the world today.

There are those that would question the Church’s involvement in politics holding that the leadership of some bishops to protect those abused by priests disqualifies the Church from civic conversation. The sexual abuse crisis is a shameful period in the Church’s history and I, and others, apologize for it everyday. We recognize that leaders and every one of us is flawed. “Let the one without sin cast the first stone.” However the credibility of our social teachings rest in the truth of the teaching itself and all Catholics are mandated to profess the truth. The great saints in our Church’s history witness to the truth with their lives. You are here today as an example of those willing to listen and witness to the truth and that makes a difference.

There are those who will say that your presence violates the separation of Church and state, that you should remain silent in the face of political debate and discussion. Without your voice and the voice of the Church, we are diminished as a society and we desecrate the freedoms of speech, religion and assembly established by our founding fathers.

We must admit that our positions are not always popular. We will hold that all human life is sacred and deserves protection from conception until natural death. We will say that the principle of solidarity binds all people together and that the hard times and tight budgets do not nullify the moral claims of the poor to seek help from the rest of us. We will say that the principle of solidarity binds us to those who come to our nation from a different place and that justice for immigrants must include a helping hand and not a closed door. We will say that we have a right to choose a good school for our children and this is a social justice issue. We will say that health care reform must be improved and that basic and affordable health insurance must be extended to all. We will say that our Catholic Charities do a great job of helping the needy, but we can do much more if our state government commits to being a partner in the efforts realizing the Church alone cannot meet the demands of those in need. We also value freedom, but only with responsibility. As Pope John Paul II wrote, "Freedom is the ability to do what we ought to do, not what we want to do."

We are free to exercise responsible sexuality. We are not free to cheapen relationships or to destroy life that God has entrusted to us. We are free to create wealth and prosper. We are not free to be indifferent to the needs of the less fortunate. We are free to defend ourselves. We are not free to use force to solve every problem. We are free to speak even when our speech is unpopular. We are not free to desecrate funerals and other sacred occasions with hateful words and degrading signs. Rather, true freedom releases us to live up to the challenges of the Gospel. Our freedom opens us to hear the voices of the poor and to be their voice to those in power. Our freedom allows us to articulate a vision of a just society supporting a culture of life. Our freedom allows us to share our hearts in service of a civilization of love.

I have mentioned the term "common good" as the object for all our actions. It could be said that it is simply the benefit of the whole community. However, the Irish Bishops Council for Justice and Peace gives this definition: "The concept of the common good gives a clear definition of the purpose of politics, the centrality of justice and equity in any form of governance and the need for those in power to pay special attention to the more vulnerable members of society, (i.e., those who are at a disadvantage in terms of defending their rights and advocating their legitimate interests)." This is a challenge to us all as people of faith to understand that the demands of the most powerful unions or the priorities of the most imposing business organizations cannot not silence the voices of those who belong to neither group. Even though some interests might be legitimate, they don't exist apart from the public interest. As President Lincoln reminded us, "Right makes might and not the other way around." We need to be people who support rights even in difficult times.

But, what are some questions that we should be asking in order to focus on the common good:

- Does a law or policy foster the social well-being and development of the entire state over that of special interests?
- Does a law respect the fundamental and inalienable rights of the dignity of the human person?
- Does the law protect the right to act according to a sound norm of conscience and to safeguard privacy, and freedom of religion?
- Does a law assess not only what the people of Wisconsin need, but does it also give due consideration to what they can afford to pay for at this moment in history?
- Does a law or policy recognize the equal dignity of human persons and strive to reduce excessive economic and social disparity?
- Does a law foster solidarity among all our people by asking all to share in any sacrifices that may be necessary?
- Does a law or budget prioritize the needs of those who are poor? Does it mitigate the sacrifices of the poor even if it means asking more of those who are better off financially?

As we ask these and other questions, we understand that our object is to seek the just society through serving the common good. In his homily at Yankee Stadium in April of 2008, Benedict said, "Each day, throughout this land you and so many of your neighbors pray to the Father in the Lord's own words: 'Thy Kingdom come.'" This prayer needs to shape the mind and heart of every Christian in this nation. It needs to bear fruit in the way you lead your lives and in the way you build up your families and your communities. It needs to create new "settings of hope" (cf. Spe Salvi, 32ff.) where God's kingdom becomes present in all its saving power.

Last time, when we gathered at the capitol, we were reminded that there are three ways to have influence. You can be powerful enough to bully. You can be rich enough to bribe. You can be principled enough to inspire. The early Christians were not powerful. In fact, they were persecuted and certainly not wealthy. (Remember Peter at the beggar's gate in the Acts of the Apostles, "Gold and silver I have not, but the word of God.") In a few moments, we will walk to meet our representatives at the capitol. We need only to listen to the radio, watch television or read a newspaper to realize that this has been a divisive session with bitter words and painful choices, but let us be examples of willing collaborators to dialogue respectfully with our elected leaders about the

Church's social teaching on various issues for the common good and for the sake of the kingdom. Let everyone we encounter remember this as the day the Catholics came to the capitol and, with respect offered their voices, their vision and their hearts in the services of all our brothers and sisters. At the beginning of my address, I told you how proud I was to be the archbishop of Milwaukee, a Catholic at the capitol and a citizen of this great state. I wish to add one more sense of pride - I am proud of you and your willingness to live your faith. May our leaders find, in us and our teaching, the common ground necessary for a better tomorrow. How will you know that they are Christians? By the love that they show one another.

God bless you!