

ADDRESS TO STATE LEGISLATURE

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Archbishop of Milwaukee
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Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker Pro-Tem, distinguished leaders of the Majority and Minority, honorable members of this historic assembly, honored guests, fellow citizens of Wisconsin:

I can only hope that you realize what a privilege it is for me to address you this morning, and how very grateful I am for your invitation. My few words allow me a providential opportunity to thank you for who you are and what you do for our community, to admire the treasury of dedication, generosity, and commitment I behold in you, devoted public servants, and to thank God for the Republic and the State we call home.

I relish this moment to assure you that the Catholic Church in Wisconsin prays daily for you, and that we savor the tradition of collaboration between civic and religious leaders in so many pivotal areas. I feel close to you, aware that we are united by a faith in God's provident sovereignty and guidance; by a mutual recognition that we sure need His help; and by a bond of common concern for a community we deeply love: this beautiful State, and the individuals, families, homes, neighborhoods, towns, churches, businesses, initiatives, projects, causes, rights, laws, and government that all go into this dazzling mosaic called Wisconsin that I have so come to know and love these last six-and-a-half months.

Your gracious invitation demonstrates the respect you have for religion, a respect never better articulated than by the Father of Our Country, who observed in his Farewell Address, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports." Your invitation to me shows high regard, not only for the 1.7 million Catholic citizens of Wisconsin, whose interests are so ably represented here by John Huebscher and the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, but for men and women of every faith and creed in this State, who have established a tradition of ecumenical goodwill and cooperation I am so grateful to inherit. Your welcome to me this morning proves that, while we all defend the constitutional principle of separation of Church and State, we reaffirm as well the American heritage that religion and morality have a cherished place in the public square, and that religion, morality, and the Churches have had a defining role to play in all the great dramas of our nation's history, from independence itself, to abolition, civil rights, respect for life, and, so timely today, war and peace. So, you see, I feel very much at home with you this morning -- even if it is the "morning after" St. Patrick's Day! -- and I thank you for your welcome.

Just recently I finished reading Peggy Noonan's latest book, *When Character Was King*, a biography of Ronald Reagan. In a particularly poignant section, she describes his current condition caused by advanced Alzheimer's: he is helpless, speechless, clueless, recognizing no one, not even his beloved Nancy; he needs help for the most elementary needs. Yet, yet, Noonan observes, when he inadvertently bumps the arm of the nurse feeding him, or steps on her toes as she leads him to the bathroom, he spontaneously looks at her and earnestly says,

"I'm sorry; excuse me; I hope I did not hurt you." The author offers this as proof of Ronald Reagan's innate, ingrained civility and courtesy, perhaps the first virtues he learned as a child, the last to go in an old man.

And, believe it or not, considering all the weighty topics I could address, that's what I want to speak about this morning: civility. I propose that's another thing that brings us together: we all agree that our society desperately needs civility.

Also, recently, I was reviewing a book being readied for this October, for the twenty-fifth anniversary of Pope John Paul II's accession to the Chair of St. Peter. This book is a series of recollections by people on their encounters with the Holy Father this past quarter century. A journalist recalls how she finally earned the chance to be one of the lucky press-pool to accompany the Pontiff on his plane for an international trip. She pushed and clawed and knocked people over to get the first seat, because she knew the practice of the Holy Father to come back into the cabin during the flight to spend an hour or so with the press, and she wanted to be the first to ask him a question. Sure enough, a couple of hours into the flight, she was absorbed in her laptop, when she sees a white sleeve, a hand with the fisherman's ring, reaching in front of her, to shake her hand. It was the Pope! She panics to stand up and stick a microphone in his face and ask the first question, but she can't unfasten her seat belt. The security guards move the Pontiff on into the crush of the other waiting journalists, and her once-in-a-lifetime chance is gone. After the hour visit with the press, the Holy Father is escorted back to his private cabin, surrounded by security, all the journalists obeying the protocol that he is now to return and the time is up. As he passes our journalist in the front seat, he stops, turns to her, and says, "I think I surprised you when I entered, and you were unable to speak with me. Is there a question you wanted to ask?" Civility.

Scholars, commentators, pundits, authors far wiser than I observe a destructive tendency in our society to throw to the side all civility, which I contend is the cement that keeps a respectful, trusting, productive society and community focused and fruitful. You all daily labor in esteemed public service where one's word is trusted, one's commitments are kept, one's colleagues, even when on the opposite side of an issue, are treated with dignity, where authority is shown deference, where manners help make the pressures of the day bearable. You are also on the front lines and know that the courtesy and civility we depend on to keep us peaceful and humane are threatened by forces such as rage, raw ambition, selfish greed, lack of basic honesty, and just plain rudeness.

As Belloc wrote: *Of courtesy, it is much less
than courage of heart or holiness.
Yet in my walks it seems to me
That the grace of God is in courtesy.*

Or, as St. Francis of Assisi observed: "Realize, dear brothers and sisters, that courtesy is actually one of the properties of God, who gives His sun and rain to the just and the unjust out of courtesy; and courtesy is the sister of charity, by which hatred is vanquished and love is cherished."

We need an injection of civility, my friends. It is in short supply. As a learned old professor of mine comments, "The barbarians are not at the gate; they're in the next room

watching TV."

It might be good to recall the three foundations of civility.

One, self-respect: We honor ourself as a child of God, made in His image, His priceless work of art, endowed with inalienable rights and duties, destined for eternity. Thus do we treat ourselves with immense reverence, and only allow words and actions to flow from us that are worthy of our birthright.

Two, a respect for others: What I believe about myself, I believe of others, and thus will only treat others as the reflection of the Divine they truly are. Thus is life itself sacred, as we believe that each of us is created in the likeness of God, that every one of us matters, that no person is defined by someone else's choices, that no life exists only as a means to someone else's ends.

This idea that life is sacred is not a uniquely Catholic proposition, but a self-evident truth, identified as such by the Founders. In my short time here, I have clearly seen that the people of Wisconsin respect life, from womb to tomb. That reverence for the sacredness of life will guide the thoughtful discussion now going on as to how to pursue new scientific technologies. The debate is complex -- the pivotal ones usually are. But the very fact that we are debating so seriously reflects our conviction that life itself is a core value, and that technology serves life and does not master it.

Three, civility is based on the common sense conclusion that society -- whether as small as my home or office, or as large as this State of Wisconsin -- can only survive, prosper, and fulfill its purpose if it is well-ordered by virtue and responsibility; that there is an inherent solidarity among us all, that a concern for the other and the wider-community is essential to ordered living; that, as Pope John Paul II observed to the Parliament of his beloved Poland, "A democracy without values, ethics, and morality can easily become totalitarian," or, as he remarked to the United Nations, "True freedom is the right to do what we ought, not what we want." And the unity of our community that is most essential to the common good we all serve is the family -- mother, father, children -- who look to Church and Government to support them, keep them united, and protect them.

Let me wind down by just mentioning a few specifics about civility that I hope all can find helpful.

A civil person is deferential and sensitive to those in need, especially the weak, the sick, the elderly, the poor, the handicapped, the young, the defenseless. This is why we welcome continued collaboration with you in the vast array of educational, health care, and charitable services in the State. As you know, the Catholic Church in Wisconsin is the largest private provider of care for the sick and aged, service to poor, hungry, homeless, and troubled, and education for our children, and I pledge to you that we want to continue as allies and partners in these noble causes.

A civil person is hospitable: venit hospes, venit Christus -- "when a guest comes, Christ comes" -- the wise proverb goes. Thus do we welcome newcomers to our cities, towns, and villages, from all possible races, ethnic backgrounds, and economic conditions, with the same

warm embrace given our ancestors who came here decades ago looking for a new home.

A civil person is temperate: By this I mean that a tone of respect for the other, a lack of acrimony, and a climate of trust characterize our public discourse.

A civil person is honest. Leaders of Church and State depend on the trust of their people. Our citizens and congregations expect from us an integrity of life. Sometimes that honesty moves us to admit painfully that this trust has been squandered, something the religious and political community both wrestle with, and that this trust must be restored, and can only be so by selfless service and integrity of life, exemplified so well by Thomas More, the patron saint of public servants, who gave his life rather than go against his conscience.

Religious leaders and lawmakers have something in common with each other and with the people we serve. We are all made of clay. Some days we are saints, some days sinners. I face that challenge, finding myself humbled by the mistakes of members of a Church I love deeply, gratified by the support of our people, determined to set things right. I trust you can relate to such feelings. Healthy communities, be they communities of citizens or of faith, are resilient and hopeful. They want leaders who, though contrite, remain committed. I ask for your prayers as I face the challenges in my own house, and promise you mine as you confront your own.

And, finally, civility means gratitude: "Thank you" is the phrase most often found in the conversation of the courteous person -- his/her conversation with God, and conversations with others.

Gratitude is the insurance for civility in this era of entitlement, where we are told to watch out only for number one, where we are led to believe that we have everything coming to us, where we are tempted to ask what others can do for us instead of what we can do for them; that God, country, society, Church owe us something but can expect nothing from us in return; where privacy, pleasure, and convenience seem the only inalienable rights. For us baby-boomers thought to be spoiled and generation x-ers said to be selfish -- gratitude moves us to acknowledge that everything we have is a gift from God and all He asks from us in return is that we use it all for His glory and the good of others.

To go on longer would be rude, my friends. And now I'm wondering if I've wasted your time. Of all the things I could have spoken about to such a prominent group of leaders -- war, justice, violence, drugs, education, W-2, the budget, the environment, pro-life issues -- all the towering issues, and here I speak on something as simple as civility? You bet I do, with much conviction, because if we lose that -- and we're in danger of doing so -- we'll lose our noble battles on all the other challenges. Sometimes we can't do much about all those other issues, but we can always do something about courtesy and civility. Sometimes more important than what we do is how we do it.

Thank you! God bless you! God bless this great State of Wisconsin! God bless America!