



CATHOLIC & AMERICAN

*A Pastoral Letter on Faith and the Republic
Where We Have Been and Where We Need to Go*

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My fellow Catholics and Americans, I was ordained a priest in 1976, when our country was celebrating its bicentennial. Now, fifty years later, we will soon observe one quarter of a millennium as a nation. Much has happened in these past fifty years and much more since the patriots declared our independence in Philadelphia in 1776. In what will be my last pastoral letter to you as your Bishop, I call upon you to reflect on where we are as a people and where we need to go.



Painting of the signing of the Declaration of Independence - 1819 - by John Trumbull

Many things have changed in the past 250 years. I will highlight only a few. Slavery was abolished and legal racial segregation as well, a Black man has a national holiday and another was elected President of the Republic. Yet racial discrimination and unjust racial disparities still exist. Women now have a more robust social role than they did in 1776. They can not only vote but hold public office. They are a major force in the economy, in the arts, and in sports. They are often leaders and servants, as employees and volunteers, in their religious communities. Still, domestic violence, almost always against women, the sexual abuse of girls and young women, including human trafficking, and the false promise made to women of lasting relief after an abortion are common plagues afflicting women.



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. arrives in Montgomery, Alabama on March 25th 1965 at the culmination of the Selma to Montgomery March. Pictured from left, Ralph Bunche, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Coretta Scott King, Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, Hosea Williams. (Photo by Morton Broffman/Getty Images)

Immigrants from around the world have come here throughout our history, many times fleeing religious and political oppression or suffocating poverty, enriching our national life with their work ethic, devotion to family, customs, foods and love for freedom. Our Catholic Church has grown from 1% of the population in 1776 to about 20% now, largely owing to immigration. Yet, in a nation built on the backs of immigrants, many Americans today would like to keep them out and deport those already here who lack legal status.

What do immigrants and so many native-born Americans find to admire in our country? Despite a terrible civil war in the mid-nineteenth century and social upheavals in other eras, our form of government is remarkably stable. Our legislative, executive and judicial branches of government at the national level, even under present strain, function reasonably well compared to most countries. We practice subsidiarity – the treatment of local matters at the local level – by having fifty state governments, which have often been the laboratories of new approaches to social,

economic and political problems. Americans are still willing to offer themselves for public service, which is a blessing. We have a strong tradition of religious liberty: no official religion and a constitutional prohibition of interference by government in people's religious practice (which we must defend, because some citizens want to restrict it). Because of abundant natural resources, incentives to work hard to get ahead and some components of a social safety net, our nation can offer a decent way of life to the majority of its people. Even the poor here are much better off than the poor in most countries of the world. We can say in all honesty that our merciful God has richly blessed our country.

Just as there are some genuinely positive features to our national life, so there remain unresolved injustices and setbacks. Consider what Thomas Jefferson, our third President, not noted for his piety, said: "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that His justice cannot sleep forever." Jefferson, a slave owner, was thinking of slavery. We know it took a civil war to bring that unjust institution to an end.



State Capital Building, Charleston, West Virginia

Like Jefferson, I, too, tremble when I reflect that God is just. When His Chosen People, the Israelites, disobeyed His commandments, he punished them, even allowing them to be conquered by their enemies and deported to a foreign land. Our Church has not been immune from God's stern correction when it has tolerated corruption and abuse. The Protestant Reformation, which split Western Christianity, had many causes but among them were the worldliness of some popes and bishops, the lax living of many priests and neglect of Scripture-based preaching, which scandalized many reformers and laity who reacted by leaving the Catholic Church. More recently the abuse of children by some clergy and religious has caused some laity to leave us and others to distrust the Church, a trust that can only be regained by showing that the Church has learned a painful lesson and has reformed.



While remembering God's mercy and blessings upon our nation, then, we must also recognize that divine punishment can be visited upon a people, whether a nation or a religion, as a salutary aspect of God's justice. Didn't Abraham Lincoln understand this? He said in his Second Inaugural Address: "If God wills that [this civil war] continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn by the sword, as was said three thousand years ago so still it must be said: *the judgements of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.*"

The God who gave us life does not want us to take it: not the life of the unborn child, not the life of a sick and depressed person who asks for help to commit suicide, not the life of the criminal, who should be punished but not deprived of the opportunity to



Students from Central Catholic High School supporting the March for Life.

repent. The God who *became flesh and dwelt among us* and who taught us to welcome the stranger does not want us to shun immigrants and deny their human dignity. The God who made man and woman for *the two of them to become one body* does not want us to empty marriage of lifelong fidelity, love and openness to having and raising children. The Christ who said to Peter: *Put your sword into its sheath*, can hardly be invoked to approve of our national leaders' penchant for war and violence and our people's tolerance of high rates of suicide and murder committed with guns. These are only a few of the evils that exist in our country. God will not be mocked. A nation that flaunts God's law cannot expect to enjoy His favor.

I am not by nature a pessimist. I believe reform is possible. The Book of Jonah is a short story that teaches that a people can change its ways, for in the story the city of Nineveh reformed when Jonah warned the people and their king that God was about

to punish them severely because of their wickedness. Real-life Judea in the late 8th and early 7th centuries BC saw a significant reform of Hebrew faith under King Hezekiah, while our Church undertook serious reforms after the Protestant Reformation – and, in our country, has done the same in the wake of the child-abuse scandal.



The Just Government League of Maryland marching in the Women's Suffrage March 3, 1913

I have seen individuals reform their lives and become God's faithful servants. I have witnessed in my lifetime some genuine social progress in the areas of race relations and respect for women's talents and abilities and I know and have worked with wonderful Americans who are committed to overcoming social injustices that continue to hurt people. But, following the sound advice of the slogan, "Friends do not let friends drive drunk," it is imperative that we look honestly at our national situation and recognize that we must take action to live up to the lofty ideals with which our country was founded and which deserve our firm commitment.

So, what can we Catholics do to preserve what is good and overcome what is evil in our national life? To begin with, we should recognize that our Catholic tradition gives us great moral and spiritual resources to offer our fellow Americans in building up a more just and peaceful society. I can illustrate that with some historical examples.

Karl Marx in nineteenth-century Europe promoted a dialectical materialism that excluded God and pitted the capitalist class of owners and managers against the working class. The Church was slow to engage with European workers and their families in the rapidly industrializing cities and towns and it lost many Catholics to Marxism. In contrast, the Catholic Church in the United States was much closer to its working-class members. Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore in 1887 wrote to Pope Leo XIII and persuaded him to acknowledge the right of workers to organize themselves in unions and to strive for just treatment while rejecting



class warfare. His influence is seen in the Pope's famous social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, issued in 1891. The Catholic working class stayed within the Church and the United States did not succumb to Marxism even as labor leaders, union members and Church officials pressed the political establishment to recognize the rights of laborers, meeting, after great struggle, with much success.

The Church historically participated in racial segregation in its Southern parishes, schools and other institutions but God's grace slowly penetrated the minds and hearts of more Catholics, some of whom supported African Americans' civil rights movement. Archbishop Patrick O'Boyle of Washington desegregated the Catholic schools in the capital city in 1948, then gradually, despite death threats, in the Southern Maryland counties. He sat next to

Chief Justice Earl Warren one night at a formal dinner when the Supreme Court was considering a case seeking the overthrow of racial segregation in public schools. The two men were overheard discussing how the Church's desegregation efforts had gone in its schools. O'Boyle's successful efforts may have helped the Warren Court reach its landmark decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954 to end racial segregation in public schools.



Students during a Chemistry class at the Blessed Martin School, Wheeling, WV.

If the two examples I have just given highlight the good that two enlightened bishops did for our country, the Catholic laity offer another example. There are many just causes in which members of the laity are involved but, over the years, their leadership and participation in the prolife movement stand out. Nellie Gray, a Catholic lawyer, organized the March for Life for many years. Many pregnancy resource centers and homes for homeless mothers were started and staffed by Catholics. Thousands have petitioned, marched and voted to end abortion. Their work is needed now more than ever but what they have already accomplished redounds to the good of the American people.



The examples I have cited, of the many I could have offered, show that being true to Catholic principles – in these cases, the dignity and rights of working people, the equality of races under the law and the fundamental right to life – can contribute to the common good of the whole nation. Because Catholic social teaching begins with the human person situated in community, it promotes the good of individuals and the whole of society. Where is the Catholic approach to the public good needed today?

Many people in our country separate social justice issues – too narrowly defined, in my opinion – from basic personal morality. I saw this split when I was in college. While promoting civil rights and workers’ rights I noticed that some of my friends were willing to indulge in various vices and betray one another even as they stood up against social injustices. I was hardly the perfect Christian but I thought that a person is, after all, one person, not two, and that every person should strive to be consistent in living by sound moral values in all of his or her activities. That understanding of the need to be consistent in public and private morality came from my Catholic faith and is a contribution that we Catholics can make to the renovation of our society.

We speak in the Church of a *culture of life* which promotes the good of the person and that of society as a whole. This resembles the statement in our Declaration of Independence: “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.” The *culture of life* recognizes that no other rights matter if a person is denied the right to life. It affirms everyone’s right to enjoy a genuine freedom to seek personal fulfillment, a right limited only by how its exercise affects other people and by objective circumstances.

Promoting a *culture of life* provides a positive agenda for Catholics and potentially for American society. In a country in which too



few children are being born, our Catholic teaching on being open to life is a prophetic call to our society to change its priorities and put people first. We do this by opposing the killing of unborn children

by abortion and by promoting natural family planning as the morally appropriate way to postpone a pregnancy when a couple’s circumstances make that advisable. The *culture of life* opposes the abuse and manipulation of children while fostering good marriages in which the couple’s love embraces the joy and burden of raising children. It cares for the sick, the injured, the frail elderly.

The *culture of life* is genuinely inclusive. It welcomes immigrants, members of all races, handicapped persons and persons who are predominantly same-sex attracted, while expecting of all the same standards of behavior that promote personal integrity and the common good. It favors the incarceration of criminals not just for punishment but for their rehabilitation and, therefore, it opposes the death penalty, which may preclude a criminal’s repentance and conversion. It defends religious freedom and encourages all

people to honor their Maker, for the *abundant life* Jesus came to bring, while beginning on earth, reaches its fullness only in the blessed life of heaven.

Pope St. John Paul II wrote about the *civilization of love*. This goes beyond a simple respect for justice and basic human rights. It fosters true solidarity with others and a willingness to extend ourselves beyond mere duty to our neighbor in need. The *civilization of love* appears in the hospice movement with its ideal of providing loving care for terminally ill persons until natural death occurs. It is seen in soup kitchens and pantries that feed the hungry, in coaching young people in sports and the arts, tutoring children and adults who lack reading skills. Catholic religious orders and fraternal organizations such as the Knights of Columbus are also signs of the *civilization of love* as they care for their members and engage in activities that contribute to the welfare of society. The many activities and movements that join people together in the pursuit of honorable and beneficial ends are like a great quilt of many parts that yet forms a beautiful and useful whole.

In promoting a culture of life and a civilization of love our Catholic faith does what George Washington said religion must do for the good of the nation: “Let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle. It is substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government” (Farewell Address). Washington recognized that faith in God, who commands His children to practice goodness, builds up the civic virtues on which a just government depends to fulfill its role.



Isaac Collins helping at the Catholic Charities Community Center of Charleston.

The enemies of a *culture of life* and the *civilization of love* are many. As Pope Benedict XVI pointed out, *secularism, relativism* and *individualism* weaken and can even destroy those worthy goals. *Secularism* seeks to exclude God from any consideration in the public square, relegating faith to private life – ignoring the role that people of faith and their religious bodies have had in forging and reforming our national life. It is seen in those who oppose state aid to religious schools, saying that this constitutes a de facto establishment of religion when in fact it simply recognizes that religious schools, like public schools, perform a public service, educating students not only in basic skills and knowledge but also forming them as responsible members of society.



Bishop Mark E. Brennan speaking to students at St. Joseph Central Catholic High School located in Huntington, WV.

Relativism proclaims that there is no objective truth: “You have your truth, I have mine.” This makes it very difficult to achieve the common understandings and standards a society ruled by reason must have. This leads to social strife. For example, persons who do not accept the sex their bodies reveal to them need our compassion and help but their subjective experience should not lead to injustice toward others: it’s not fair that biological males should be allowed to compete in women’s sports.

Individualism seeks a heightened personal liberty that ignores the common good and does it harm. It shows up in the promotion of an unbridled freedom in sexual matters and in prejudices against certain classes of people, such as immigrants “who do not look like us,” whom the powerful want to exclude from full participation in society and its benefits. It also is seen in the demand of some parents and guardians that their children be exempt from childhood vaccinations for religious or conscience reasons, despite the fact that such vaccinations have nearly eliminated many childhood diseases. (Exemptions for medical reasons are acceptable.) In this case parental freedom must be limited by a concern for the health of a vulnerable class of human beings who need more protection than adults do: children. Such exemptions tilt too far toward individual freedom and away from the common good.

Those who drink of the wine of *secularism, relativism* and *individualism* will use government, large business corporations, media allies, celebrities and professional societies in fields as diverse as medicine and sports to advance their agenda. Those powerful institutions and influential people are also strongly motivated to protect their



own interests. In them are some good people but, collectively, they tend to act on their own behalf. They seek to keep the rest of society distracted in order to maintain their dominant position. It is the same strategy used by the elite families of ancient Rome to keep the lower classes in their place: *panis et circus*, bread and the circus. The lower classes were given enough bread to eat and provided with constant entertainment in the stadiums and coliseums of ancient cities so that they would not rebel against the ruling class.



Look at modern China. The Communist government adopts a similar strategy, giving enough access to material goods and personal choices to keep most of the people happy while the Communist Party maintains a firm overall control. In the United States we enjoy a standard of living that allows most people to avoid starving to death while many diminish their humanity by taking mind-altering drugs. Sports have become a practical idolatry, sex without responsibility is commonplace and a constant array of new technologies enralls us (the latest smart phone or video game). These elements of modern American society function as *panis et circus*, distracting large segments of the population from pursuing their true personal good and our common national good. This leads to the neglect of serious issues of justice and social harmony and allows the elite class and powerful institutions to maintain their dominance.

In the struggle between the Catholic approach to our national project and the principles of *secularism*, *relativism* and *individualism*, one side or the other will eventually prevail. I believe, as did Abraham Lincoln, who, citing Jesus Christ, declared, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” We who believe in the *culture of life* and the *civilization of love* need to see clearly what is at stake: the very soul of our country. What kind of nation do we want to be? We must repent of any indifference toward our nation’s welfare.

Are we willing to take a stand for what we believe to be best for our country? Our opponents are doing so. We must put God's way first, educate our children in it and not shrink from the struggle.

Faced with such formidable enemies, we need both wisdom and courage. God generously provides these gifts to His children. Jesus said to his Apostles several times after his resurrection: *Be not afraid*. He also said: *Come to me, you who are heavily burdened and I will refresh you*. We can count on the Lord to help us. It is said that, as the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia was meeting in 1787, a woman asked Benjamin Franklin what kind of government the delegates to the Convention had created. His reply was: "A republic, Madam, if you can keep it." As we joyfully celebrate our nation's two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of independence, we are the Americans who must "keep it." We Catholics have a lot to offer our fellow citizens, if we have the courage and patriotism to do so. Catholics of West Virginia, be truly Catholic and truly patriotic! Work for the genuine good of your country and trust that God will bless your efforts.







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