

# Renewing the Public Square

My friends know that I have an interest in signs. I look for the irony that's often in them; I look for the humor. And I am regularly rewarded.

Church signs are my favorites. I spotted this one outside a Methodist church not far from my office in Annapolis: "Don't let worry kill you," it says. "Let God help." This two-part sign was outside a Baptist church in the northeast corner of Maryland: The first part, this: "Sunrise Service: "Jesus Walks on Water." And then, below it: "Evening Worship: Looking for Jesus."

The Episcopalians and the Catholics don't seem to do curbside advertisements. Our reasons are different, I think. The Episcopalians think such ads are *déclassé*, if not also in very bad taste. We'd never think that. No, in our case it's that pastors simply haven't got the ingenuity it takes to find 52 ways of saying the same thing: "This Sunday, we're going to ask you for more money and invent news ways of doing so."

But we do bulletins, don't we, and every once in a while, the messages one finds in Sunday bulletins are priceless. These two bulletin announcements appeared within two weeks of one another at my parish in Bethesda, Maryland -- First, this: "A dozen new choir robes are needed due to the

addition of new members and the deterioration of some older ones.” And the second, two weeks later: “Ladies, don’t forget the rummage sale next Sunday after the 10 o’clock Mass. It’s a chance to get rid of all those things you don’t need anymore. Bring your husbands.”

This one, I found on a recent visit to Scranton, Pennsylvania, my birthplace, in the church I attended when I was a boy: “Our eighth-grade girls’ basketball team is back in action again next Saturday at noon. Come out and watch them beat the socks off Mary, Queen of Peace.”

And this one, believe it or not, was in the very same bulletin: “A bean supper will be held Thursday at six in the parish hall. Music will follow.”

It’s a sign of a particular kind on which I want to focus here -- a sign of our times: The relationship of religion and politics.

The good news here is that there seems to be a growing appreciation for the impact that moral and religious values can have on American life. Increasingly, it is being acknowledged that the most important political and social issues have religious dimensions and moral consequences. From abortion to the budget, from the environment to eugenics and euthanasia, from health care to human rights, from welfare to warfare, ethical values and religious principles are at stake and, more and more, faith communities are involving themselves in the public arena.

The news is not all good, however, far from it. For there's a threat here, and a temptation. Stronger links between religion and politics can diminish both if we're not careful. Witness Thomas More, whose life the Eighth King Henry's headsman took -- he knew the danger. So did his predecessor in martyrdom, Thomas Becket, slain by the Second King Henry's barons. The Becket of *Murder in the Cathedral*, T.S. Eliot's wonderful play in poetry, gets it right:

Servant of God has chance of greater sin  
And sorrow, than the man who serves a king.  
For those who serve the greater cause may make the cause  
serve them,  
Still doing right; and striving with political men  
May make that cause political, not by what they do  
But what they are.

Sometimes, Gospel messages get lost in the political rhetoric and entangled by the ideological temptations of our time. As believers, as Catholics, we must fight the temptation to approach our faith through the door of our politics; rather (and this is critical to my argument) . . . rather should we enter the forum of politics through the door of our faith.

Speaking personally, I find the Religious Right more often right than religious, more a powerful faction of the Republican Party than the voice of believers in public life. I wonder where the immigrant day worker and the single mother struggling to make ends meet fit in their agenda. I wonder

where the “poorest among us” appear on their list of policy priorities. Similarly, I wonder about the politically-correct Christians of the left, who seem to find no differences between the teachings of their faith and the secular-humanist manifesto that has become the Democratic Party’s policy agenda. They say they defend the weak, but not an unborn child’s right to life, not even the victim of the infanticide that is partial-birth abortion. They protest the loss of an endangered fish, but not the loss of a million and one-half unborn children.

And so the seeming rediscovery of religious values in the public square can be superficial, it can be selective, and, goodness knows, it can partisan. We should be wary of religious leaders who use their authority to lay hands on this president, or that member of Congress, or on this or that governor or state lawmaker. Our challenge, and the challenge for all Christians, is to be principled without being ideological, to be political without being partisan, to be civil without being soft, to be involved without being used.

This is a formidable, challenge, I know. Let’s consider how we might confront it.

I think we can best begin by seeing no contradiction between being a Catholic and being a citizen; by recognizing in our citizenship and all that citizenship means a kind of Catholic imperative.

Early in the 1800s, a distinguished visitor from Europe wrote that America was at the same time “the most democratic country in the world, and . . . the country in which the Roman Catholic religion makes most progress.” What Alexis de Tocqueville thought then, nearly 200 years ago, is true today. This land of ours remains a particularly fitting home for our Church, its soil a particularly rich soil for our beliefs. And the character of the American people remains incorrigibly religious. Over time, there have been attempts to change us in this regard. John Dewey and Walter Lippman and their ideological successors have tried to do so, with their separate versions of a public philosophy, but their attempts have proven religiously tone-deaf and they have not been heeded by an American people who know, deep in their bones, that public life here has an irreducible moral component. *Raison d’etat* and *Realpolitik* are categories that ill-fit the American temper. That’s a source of continual frustration for peoples elsewhere around the globe. Here, though, politics has always been a matter of what *ought* to be, as well as a matter of what is.

And it’s a source of bitter frustration for those among us, particularly those politicians among us, who want us to believe that our faith should be an entirely private matter. That’s what they imply when they respond to our letters calling for an end to partial-birth abortion, or asking for equal

treatment for parents whose tax dollars are used to pay for the education of other people's children, but not their own. And sometimes the push to remove our faith-based motivations from the public square is anything but implied.

During the four-year term of the Maryland General Assembly that ended last April, some Maryland lawmakers made several concerted, very public attacks on our Sacrament of Penance and otherwise tried to punish the dioceses of Maryland for sins committed by a very small number of our clergy. There was an attack on Church-run programs, too. It took the form of legislation designed to penalize Catholic Charities agencies and Catholic hospitals for refusing to hire persons engaged in a homosexual lifestyle and, in the case of our hospitals, for refusing to perform abortions. Not too many years ago in Oregon, the pro-euthanasia side in an assisted-suicide campaign called itself the "Don't-Let-Them-Cram-Their-Religion-Down-Your-Throats Coalition." Guess whose religion they were talking about!

Most of us here remember former Colorado Senator Gary Hart. Twenty years ago, he was a leading candidate for the presidency. Then his relationship with Donna Rice was exposed. Bill Clinton's dalliances were made public when he was a presidential candidate, too, and then when he *was* the president. At the time of the Hart shenanigans, there was an op-ed headline in the *New York Times* that was later echoed on the editorial pages of

more than a few major newspapers in pieces focusing on Clinton's fitness for public office. "The issue is not morality," the headline read, "but integrity!" Oh, really! Tell that to the Pilgrims. Tell it to Jonathan Edwards. Tell it to the 18th century Baptists and Wesleyans, to the Abolitionists and the Prohibitionists and the Latter Day Saints. Tell it to the civil rights movements of the 50s and early 60s. Tell it to the chaplains of Congress and in the armed services. Tell it to some 15 generations of the black church. Tell it to Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King. Religious-based values are the center stone of the American public square. And here in the United States, in my Maryland, in your Kentucky, "public policy" and "religiously-grounded values" should not and must not be put into separate, hermetically-sealed containers. So it was from the outset of our republic. So it has been across the more than 200 years of its history. So it is today.

We are still, thank God, "one nation, *under God*," which means, of course, under judgment. And we Americans continue to know, deep in the inmost recesses of our minds and hearts, that our experiment in ordered liberty is both intended and destined to be worked out against a transcendent horizon, that the ultimate test of rightness or wrongness of public policy in the United States is not whether a proposition manages to win majority support. Some things here are not up for a vote! That's the meaning of our Bill of Rights.

The most fundamental “oughts” in American public life derive, not from counting votes, but from a view of the human person that is derived from transcendent moral norms.

What of us -- we Catholic Americans? Well, for starters, we *are* Catholics, and so we know that God did not come into the world to fetch us *out* of our humanity, but to redeem us *in* it. Like the 4<sup>th</sup> Century mystic and theologian St. Gregory of Nyssa, we know that God became human “so that we might learn from a human being how a human being might become divine.” In our incarnational theology, we nurture a deep love for God’s world and God’s creatures -- we are world-affirming, not world-rejecting. The convert G.K. Chesterton said that one of the great attractions of his Catholicism was its high regard for a thick steak, a pint of stout, and a good cigar!

And we hold other truths. We know that evil is abroad in the land, seeking someone to devour. We know that a Church which allows the world to set the ecclesial agenda is a Church which has abandoned its birthright and its integrity. We know that there are times when a resounding “No” must be said to the principalities and powers of this world, to the politicians and political parties.

And we know more. Our Church is the bearer of a rich heritage of moral reflection on the right-ordering of society that dates back almost two

millennia. And so we know that the state is not the whole of human existence and does not embrace the whole of human hope. And we know that democracy is not merely procedural and functional, but must have a substantive *moral* content if it is to serve the cause of true human liberation.

In our tradition, citizenship is a virtue and participation in the political process is an obligation. We bring to our participation some very Catholic assets. We bring a consistent set of principles that derive from Catholic teaching, not from partisan platforms or ideological agendas. We stand with the unborn and the undocumented. We defend children in the womb and on welfare. We oppose the violence of abortion and the vengeance of capital punishment. We oppose assault weapons on our streets and condoms in our schools. Our agenda is sometimes counter-cultural, God knows -- but it reflects our consistent concern for human life and human dignity. It's more than a campaign promise, more than the platitudes of a political party's platform. It's in the life and the words of our Savior, in the teaching of the Scriptures, in the teachings of His Church.

“Without a vision, the people will perish.” That's what the scriptures tell us. Well, we have a vision! We don't need polls to tell us what we believe. And we don't spend time re-inventing ourselves every election year. Our Church has been called a lot of things.

**We have other unique assets. We bring years of broad experience serving people in need. Our Catholic community educates the young, cares for the sick, shelters the homeless, feeds the hungry, assists needy families, welcomes refugees, and comforts the elderly. The poor and the vulnerable are not abstractions for us -- they are in our parishes and schools, our shelters and soup kitchens, our hospitals and charities agencies. We're the largest non-governmental provider of human services, education, and health care there is. And this is not only the case here in the U.S. It's the case worldwide. And so on many of the most vital issues being debated in the public square, we have practical expertise and first-hand, day-to-day experience to contribute.**

**We also bring a structure to our participation in the public square. Oh my, do we have structure! We have a structure others would die for! Every other institution in society is trying to figure out how to have a local presence. We start with one. Think about it. Think about how far you've got to go to get beyond the boundaries of a Catholic parish. The Sahara, maybe? Maybe. We are rooted in city neighborhoods and rural communities. We have structures at the city and state levels. The good works of your four Kentucky-serving dioceses, their schools, their Charities agencies; the splendid works of their youth ministries, their ministries for the disabled, their offices for**

**vocations and religious education and communications; the wonderful contributions of the Knights of Columbus, the Catholic Daughters, the Holy Name Societies and the other Catholic lay organizations whose members share a deep faith and want to incorporate the teachings of their Church into their daily lives.**

**There's structure at the national level, too. The National Bishops' Conference, Catholic Charities U.S.A, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the National Catholic Education Association. Ah yes, we have structure. Structure galore! Structure at the global level, too, for we are part of a Universal Church.**

**With all these special attributes, these blessings, if you will, we are rather like the gifted athlete who's endowed with uncommon physical grace, racehorse speed and Herculean strength. The question for us is the same as it is for him: Will we live up to our potential? We are obliged to do so.**

**As Catholics, we are specially obliged to bring our consistent principles, our wealth of caring, compassionate service experience, and, yes our counter-cultural agenda to the public square. And once there, we are fools if we don't rely on our unique structure.**

**We know from whence these high obligations derive, don't we? They come from Him. It is Jesus who commands us to love our neighbors, and to extend**

**our loving embrace beyond individual relationships in ways that infuse and transform all human relations, from the family to the entire human community. It is Jesus who came to “bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free . . . .” And it is Jesus who calls us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick and afflicted, and comfort the victims of injustice.**

**To be sure, His words and example require individual acts of charity and concern. But they require more of us, don’t they? They do if we are Catholics, for our Church calls us to the high standard of discipleship. Yes, we are called to rebirth in Christ. Yes, we are called to a personal relationship with our Savior. But we are also called to be His agents, to be His evangelizers, to be His disciples. He came not only to “bring good news to the poor” and “to proclaim liberty,” He came to show us how! We are His people. We are the Body of Christ. And in Him, through Him, guided by His example, we are called to understanding and action on a scale that extends well beyond ourselves.**

**Action of this kind necessarily involves the institutions and structures of our time. Pope John Paul II puts it this way: “As a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, solidarity . . . needs to be practiced through participation in social and political life.”**

**Solidarity in participation. What this means, I think, is that in its commitment to the common good, the Church's responsibility falls on all of its members, clergy and laity alike.**

**The hierarchy's share of the burden is a heavy one, for theirs are the tasks of providing norms for the formation of our conscience, of making the connection between Gospel values and the public order, and of exhorting us to *act* on our understanding of that vital connection.**

**We need to encourage our clergy to embrace that responsibility. We need to assist them in bearing its heavy burden. It's not easy to preach about divorce, not when you know that your congregation includes people who have known the effects of divorce. It's not easy to preach mercy and forgiveness when you know that some of your listeners have been roughly touched by wanton violence. It's not easy to declaim against abortion when you know that members of your flock have had abortions. Yet those lessons must be taught. Taught in hope. Taught in love and with great compassion, to be sure. But taught, and taught in earnest. This is the job of our clergy and it's no easy job.**

**The American novelist William Faulkner was no stranger to the demons of the human spirit. Yet in his 1950 Nobel Prize address, he offered this act of faith:**

**I decline to accept the end of man. It is easy enough to say that man is immortal simply because he will endure: that when the last dingdong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny, inexhaustible voice, still talking. I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely endure, . . . he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting up his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past.**

**Faulkner's definition of the poet's and writer's duty and privilege is also true of a Church at the service of peace and justice, and it is a particularly apt description of the role and responsibilities of our clergy. Our job is to help them *see* that duty, to *accept* that role, to fully embrace its responsibilities.**

**And as we support and encourage our clergy in teaching the lessons of the Gospel and in applying them to the important policy issues of our time, we must be open to the prospect that what we hear, no matter how lovingly it is communicated, might be hard to take. Gospel lessons are lessons of the greatest love, but they are hard lessons, too, for the Gospel path leads not to a bed of roses; it leads to the cross. Yet we need to be challenged. We need to be roused. We need, some of us, to be shaken from our lethargy. We need to hear the call to take up the cross, and to carry it into the public square.**

**"Build it and they will come." That was one of the heavenly urgings in**

*Field of Dreams*, a highly spiritual film of some years ago. Ours, to our beloved clergy, should be “Preach it and we will listen. Challenge us and we will respond.”

Increasingly over the course of the last several generations, we Americans have become enlightened consumers. We are prudent buyers. We shop around -- for the car with the highest miles per gallon and the charge card with the lowest interest rate; for the department store with the greatest diversity and the phone company with the lowest long-distance charge. We shop around for churches, too; we Catholics no less than other people of faith. And loyalty to the neighborhood parish isn't what it was when most of us were young. What I think you'll find these days is that the parishes that are the most crowded, the ones filling up with congregants from well beyond their neighborhood boundaries, are the parishes in which the Gospel is preached not only with a special intensity, but also with an acute appreciation for the connection between Gospel values and the great questions of the day. And not only that -- not only infused with an appreciation for the connection, but also wrapped in an ardent appeal to us to *act* on that connection, to *do something* to reshape social and political life.

Our Catholic media bear the responsibility to supplement the clergy's role in pointing us to the public square and encouraging us to bring with us our

moral compass. If we're to act, act in an informed manner, act decisively, we need to know what's at issue. We need to know when a policy issue is being debated that invites an application of our teaching. We need to know *how* our teaching applies to the issue. We also need to know who's with us in the debate, and who's not. Our Catholic media can do all this without being in any way partisan; they can and properly should. And when a session of the U.S. Congress or the state legislature adjourns, our Catholic media can tell us which of our senators and congressman, which of our state lawmakers voted for measures that reflect our teaching, and which ones did not. Our Catholic media can tell us this without being in any way partisan. They can and properly should. And in an election year, our Catholic media can tell us which candidates promise, once they're elected, to reflect our teaching in their votes, and which ones do not. Our media can do this without being in any way partisan; they can and properly should.

So much for our beloved clergy and their heavy burden. So much for the Catholic media and their responsibility to ensure that we are properly informed players on the public-policy stage. What about us? If that's our clergy's job, if that's our media's responsibility, what's ours? What's the laity's role and responsibility?

Well, in terms of activity in political affairs, ours is an even heavier

burden, for it is us upon whom the primary responsibility for renewing the temporal order rests. Here's what the Second Vatican Council said in its

*Constitution on the Church:*

**. . . the laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God . . . . They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven . . . . They are called there by God so that by exercising their proper function and being led by the spirit of the Gospel, they can work for the sanctification of the world from within, in the manner of leaven.**

**“The sanctification of the world”-- now there's a challenge! And it's our challenge, yours and mine. How in the world do we go about undertaking it? I think we should begin, each of us, by accepting *personal* responsibility for renewing the public square and the debate that goes on there.**

**On a gray November day 144 years ago, Abraham Lincoln delivered the dedication remarks at the opening of a cemetery for soldiers of the Civil War. And as he looked out across the thousands who had gathered on that field in Gettysburg, it seemed to him that what he was viewing was more than just another noteworthy battlefield. It had fallen to him to argue that the Civil War signaled not a failure of politics, but a test, a test to determine once and for all “whether this nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure.” We pass this test, he said, not by dedicating cemeteries, but by dedicating ourselves.**

**And so must we. The capacity of our society to cope with the complexities of our age depends, quite literally, on you and me -- on our imagination, on our creativity, on our will, and above all on our faith-based sense of public responsibility, which means our personal responsibility for the general outcome of our efforts together.**

**We also must examine our consciences, our beliefs and attitudes about the signs of our time, and the connectedness of those beliefs and attitudes to Gospel values and the luminous teachings of our Church. Socrates thought that the unexamined life is not worth living. But the unhappy truth is that few of us actually have the time (perhaps I should say, take time) for reflection on the great issues of our day and the contemporary relevance to those issues of our 2,000-year-old faith. We must find the time and put it to good advantage.**

**We also must be confident about our role in the public debate, our rightful role. Those who argue for absolute personal autonomy, those who promote a wholly secular society want the world to believe that it is wrong for government to impose one person's morality on others. That's drivel and it needs to be revealed for the drivel it is! *Every law, every government regulation imposes one person's morality on somebody else. That's because law has only two functions: Either it tells people to do what they would rather not do, or it forbids them to do what they would. What the personal***

autonomists and the secularists really want is to impose their morality on the rest of us. We can't let them, for we know that the American experiment cannot survive the sterilization of the public arena that occurs when morality-based and religiously-based values are ruled out of order in the public discourse. We must insist that this doesn't come to pass, for we know that we are not far from Dachau and Auschwitz and the Gulag, and we know that when moral values are excluded from the public square, raw force alone determines the outcome.

St. Ambrose said, "Not only for every idle word must man render an account, but for every idle silence." There is need for us to speak. We have every right to speak. And speak we must. With a conviction that is based upon the rock of our faith. With a clarity that is refined by reflection and illuminated by the Holy Spirit. And with charity. Often, too often I think, we forget the charity part. We forget who our Model is and how He advised us: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone!" He came in love, and so must we. Condemnation will not convince. Exclusion will not convert. Love will. Love builds bridges. Love can soften the hardest heart and change even the most steadfast mind. Love is His way. It should be ours.

The day before he was assassinated in 1968, the Reverend Martin Luther King reflected on the times in which he lived. And he said,

**If I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of a general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, “Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?” . . . I would turn to the Almighty and say, “If you would allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the Twentieth Century, I will be happy.” Now that’s a strange statement to make because the world is all messed up. But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough, can you see the stars.**

**Faith-based and Gospel-driven, Dr. King lit up the night of his time, and his light, the reflected light of his Christian faith, illuminated the darkest corners of the public square. So must ours, for, as Shakespeare put it: “Heaven does with us as we with torches do, not light them for themselves.” Let each of us bring the light with which we have been entrusted into the public square -- the light of our God, the light of our faith, the clear, bright light of our Church’s teachings. *If we will, when we do*, we cannot help but dramatically change political life and the public debate. And that will be a very good outcome, indeed.**