



## Citizenship, community and public life

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*Address to Colorado Legatus in the refectory of the John Paul II Center for the New Evangelization*

Back in the 1930s, a young German thinker looked at the political violence in his own country and wrote the following words of admiration for the United States:

He said, "American democracy is not founded on the [so-called] emancipated man . . . but upon the kingdom of God and [the] limitation of all earthly powers by the sovereignty of God."

He could see in America a freedom based on the sanctity of every human person.

He could see in America a nation founded by people who — despite all their sins — at least understood that the powers of this world are subject to a higher authority. The men and women who founded America understood the lessons of Scripture — that God *judges* the strong; that God *protects* the weak; and that God *guarantees* the rights of all persons, beginning with the right to life.

This young German thinker — in his own experience, in his own country — could contrast the peace and blessings of America with the disaster that happens when leaders ignore God and begin to decide for themselves who qualifies as a human person . . . and who does not.

Now, America in 2003 is obviously a long way from Germany in the 1930s. But later this month, on January 22, we mark the 30th anniversary of *Roe vs. Wade*, the Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion on demand. And the *Roe* decision, in very many ways, has been a turning point in our life as a nation. In the space of a few decades, an act of violence that was condemned as a "crime against humanity" at the Nuremberg Trials, has become a woman's "right to choose" — and even an act of convenience. So we need to ask ourselves whether we're really so far removed from the past as we think.

I suspect we're not, and here's why: Political systems are organic. They're ecologies. Even Benjamin Franklin, who was not a particularly virtuous man, once wrote that, "Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom." Bad laws and bad court decisions poison the roots of the way we live. They damage the way we think — and that damage in turn creates *more* bad laws, *more* bad court decisions, and *more* bad political behavior. . . and gradually we lose the ability to see what's right, and to do what's good. We lose the ability to recognize and live real freedom. And that's where we find ourselves today.

When the Supreme Court issued *Roe vs. Wade* in 1973, it set two distinct tragedies in motion. First, it legalized abortion on demand. It opened the floodgates to killing 40 million unborn children, and it wounded the lives of millions of women and men in the process. *Roe* put the definition of human personhood *up for grabs*. It removed the unborn from human status — and in doing so, it set a precedent that comes back to haunt us in all our debates about infanticide, physician-assisted suicide and what some hospitals now alarmingly call "inappropriate care" for the seriously ill.

Second — and in a way, just as brutally — *Roe* undermined our reasoning and our moral vocabulary. We're losing our ability to think clearly about moral issues. The way abortion supporters misuse the label "pro choice" simply proves this point. "Pro choice," as an expression, has no connection at all with the real, flesh-and-blood event of an abortion. Abortion always involve a killing. But the language surrounding it has become sanitized, evasive, and dishonest.

The word "community" means more than just a social agreement to tolerate each other's appetites and alibis. Real community always involves shared beliefs and a shared commitment to the future. The common good *always* demands that individuals sacrifice their own wants and needs for the good of others. So if we want to renew our public life as a nation, we need to begin by realizing that abortion, euthanasia, racial and ethnic prejudice, greed, exploitation of the poor and all the other acts of violence against human dignity in our day begin right here — in our own selfishness as private citizens; in our own refusal to live in a spirit of truth.

G.K. Chesterton used to say that "tolerance" is the alibi of people who don't believe in anything, and that the point of having an open mind is the same as having an open mouth: Sooner or latter, it's supposed to close on something solid. Chesterton wasn't preaching the joys of bigotry. Actually, he was doing just the opposite. As Christians we have the very serious obligation to show *even our enemies* charity, justice, mercy, understanding and respect.

But we also have the responsibility to do all these things in a spirit of love and honesty, which means working to serve the truth, and naming and resisting sin. Real love is always rooted in truth. And we serve the common good best when we serve the truth best. That's what Samuel Adams meant when he wrote that a person "is the truest friend of the liberty of his country who tries most to promote its virtue." And that's what George Washington meant in his Farewell Address when he warned that, "reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."

History is made — and nations are built — by people who *believe in something zealously and act on it in the public square*, not by people who have a neutrality or even a skepticism toward all belief.

If we want public officials who act with both intelligence and moral character, the only way we'll get those qualities is by carrying our religious faith and moral principles into the public debate — not just at election time like last November, but week in and week out, in dialogue with the people who represent us.

Anyone who reads the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution or "The Federalist Papers," understands that the Founders saw America as an experiment in ideas and *moral principles*. The political leader who claims to be "personally opposed" to abortion and then votes to protect a so-called right to choose abortion, colludes in the destruction of innocent human life. Moreover, he's being untrue to his own convictions, and therefore is unworthy of public service. The same applies to each and every one of us as voters.

We can't simultaneously commit ourselves to human rights, and then vote for people and policies that attack the weakest among us. And as Catholics, we can't live our commitment to the sanctity of human life only as a private piety. People of religious faith need to live their moral witness *courageously, as a matter of public record and civic responsibility* — or we'll lose our faith even as a matter of private principle.

We need to remind ourselves that real democracy is almost always impolite. *Real pluralism always involves a degree of conflict. It demands that people of faith will work tirelessly to advance their deeply held beliefs about human dignity by every legal, ethical, non-violent method available to them.* For Catholics, this is what it means to be leaven in society. If we're leaven, we need to offer our culture the whole truth about the dignity of the human person, even when the message is unpopular.

We get the elected officials we deserve. Their virtue — or their lack of it — is a judgment not only on them, but also on us. Every political choice we make, also affects the persons we are. Private conviction is not a separate universe from public life. If we really believe in Jesus Christ, if we really mean it when we say we're Catholic, then that's the soil from which all our public actions should flower, including our political choices. When we claim to believe one thing, but act in the opposite political manner, we choose a kind of schizophrenia. We contradict ourselves. And the result is the sort of moral confusion we find in so many elements of our public life today.

I began with the words of a young German thinker, and I want to return to him as we close.

The same young man once wrote that, "There is no clearer indication of the idolization of death than . . . when big words are spoken of a 'new man,' a [better] world and of a new society which is to be ushered in, and yet all that is new is the destruction of life . . . "

He wrote that the killing of an unborn child "in the mother's womb is a violation of the right to live which God has bestowed upon" every person. "To raise the question [of whether the unborn child is already] a human being or not, is merely to confuse the issue. The simple fact is that God certainly intended to create a human being, and that this nascent human being has been deliberately deprived of his life. And that is nothing but murder."

The young German thinker who wrote these words was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great Lutheran theologian and pastor. Bonhoeffer was martyred by the Third Reich in April 1945. He gave his life as a witness to his faith in Jesus Christ, and to the sanctity of the human person.

Surely we can at least *live* our lives – as believers and as citizens — in a way that shares in his witness. And if we do, then the future we help create will be worthy of our children; of our nation's best ideals; and of our identity as a free people.