



## Remarks to City Club of Denver

March 1 , 2005

Some of you may remember that a year ago I was part of a rally on the Capitol steps to protect state funding for the poor and homeless. But you didn't read about it in the *Rocky* or the *Denver Post*, because they didn't cover it.

Last September, just a few weeks before the election, I preached a homily to 5,000 people at Red Rocks, and I had them repeat out loud three times that if we forget the poor, we'll go to hell. That's one of the principles of Catholic social teaching. If we forget the poor, God will forget us. By our indifference, we will damn ourselves. But you didn't read about that in the press either, because – again - - nobody covered it.

Our diocesan website has at least 18 articles I've written and talks I've given against the death penalty in the past few years. They're just a fraction of what I've said and done against capital punishment for more than three decades. The press covered that *one time* recently -- when I criticized our Republican governor.

Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Denver is the largest non-government provider of aid to the poor in the Rocky Mountain region. As a Church, more than 80 percent of our time, resources, ministry personnel and lobbying efforts go to issues that have nothing to do with abortion. But you'll never see that on anybody's front-page either, because it isn't news.

My point here isn't to criticize the press. Both of our local papers have excellent religion reporters, and – not always, but in general – the Church gets fair treatment in the media. My point is that Catholics have *always* been active on a very wide range of political issues, both individually and as a Church. This is normal and sensible. It's so normal that nobody pays attention – until they disagree.

Public witness on issues of public concern is natural and essential for Catholics because of our commitment to the common good and to the dignity of each human person. Those two pillars – the common good and the dignity of every human person – come right out of Scripture. They underpin all of Catholic social thought.

Now, plenty of other good people work from these same principles, including many persons who have no religious faith. But for Catholics, our political involvement flows from our core religious beliefs about creation and salvation. The human person is made in the image and likeness of God. Christ died for each and every one of us. The Church continues His work of salvation. Therefore the Church must engage herself in human affairs – not just in individual personal lives, but also in the public issues that shape our common future.

That includes politics. Politics is where the competing moral visions of a society meet and struggle. And since the overwhelming majority of American citizens are religious believers, it's completely appropriate for people and communities of faith to bring their faith into the public square.

Real pluralism always involves a struggle of ideas. Democracy *depends* on people of conviction fighting for what they believe in the public square – non-violently, respectfully and ethically, but also vigorously and without embarrassment. People who try to separate their private convictions about human dignity and the common good from their involvement in public issues are not acting with integrity, or with loyalty to their own principles. In fact, they're stealing from their country.

To be healthy, the political process *demand*s that people conform their actions to their beliefs. For Catholics to be silent in an election year -- or any year -- about critical public issues because of some misguided sense of good manners, would actually be a form of theft from our national conversation.

For religious believers not to advance their convictions about public morality in public debate is not an example of tolerance. It's a lack of courage.

If we believe that a particular issue is gravely wrong and damaging to society, then we have a duty, not just a religious duty but also a *democratic* duty, to hold accountable the candidates who want to allow it. Failing to do that is an abuse of responsibility on our part, because that's where we exercise our power as citizens most directly -- in the voting booth.

The many American religious leaders and believers who worked against slavery and segregation, or in favor of farm worker rights and industrial labor justice, served their country very well. They did what they did because they had a reverence for human dignity shaped by their religious faith.

The "separation of Church and state" can never mean that religious believers should be silent about legislative issues, the appointment of judges or public policy. It's not the job of the Church to run political candidates. But it's very much the job of the Church to guide Catholics to think and act in accord with their faith.

If a candidate attacks a foundational issue of human dignity, or a principle of Catholic belief, don't blame the Church for speaking out about it. That's her vocation. We didn't pick abortion as a battleground. That was forced on the country 30 years ago by judicial coup. For Catholics, the civil order has its own sphere of responsibility and its own autonomy apart from the Church. But that doesn't mean that civil authorities are exempt from moral engagement and criticism, either by individual believers or by the Church as a body. And this fits very comfortably with the mind of the Founders.

What the Founders intended was to prevent the establishment of an official state Church. They never intended, and never wrote into the Constitution, any prohibition against religious believers, religious leaders or religious communities taking an active role in public issues and the political process. The idea of exiling religion from public debate would have made no sense to them.

Jefferson and Franklin were Deists. But most of the Founders were practicing Christians. And all of them were deeply influenced by Christian thought. Our history as a nation is steeped in religious imagery and language.

The idea that we can pull those religious roots out of our political life without hurting our identity as a nation is both imprudent and dangerous. The United States is non-sectarian. That's good. That's important. But "non-sectarian" does not mean anti-religious, atheist, agnostic or even fully secular. Our public institutions flow -- in large part -- from a *religious* understanding of human rights, human nature and human dignity.

When the "separation of Church and state" begins to mean separating religious faith from public life, we begin to separate government from morality and citizens from their consciences. And that leads to politics without character, which is now a national epidemic.

By the way, the state doesn't seem to worry too much about "separation of Church and state" when it wants to force its point of view on Catholic hospitals, and it's often the same people who clamor about "separation" and "choice" who take the lead in the coercion. If HB 1042 passes the current legislative session and becomes a law, it will force Catholic hospitals to do things that violate Catholic teaching. The problem with HB 1042 for Catholics is not contraception. The problem with HB 1042 is that it mandates a form of so-called "emergency contraception" that could amount to early-term abortion, and that is always very gravely wrong.

From a Catholic perspective, the better we live our faith, the better we live our citizenship. The more faithful we are as religious believers, the more faithful we are as Americans. That may not get a candidate elected, but it will keep him honest -- and his honesty will make our public life more honest.

If people are serious about their faith, then their whole lives will naturally be formed and guided by their religious convictions. For Catholics, all of our actions and all of our choices should be rooted in our Catholic identity and in our relationship with God. That means our choices at work; at play; within our families; in how we treat other people; and also the choices we make in living out our citizenship. This doesn't lead to "intolerance." In fact, faith lived well leads in exactly the opposite direction.

American religious tolerance owes as much to Roger Williams, who founded the Rhode Island colony, and William Penn, who founded the Pennsylvania colony, as it does to any thinker of the Enlightenment. And both Williams and Penn were devoutly Christian believers.

Most people at most times in history have drawn their moral guidelines from their religious beliefs. And for most Americans, those beliefs are rooted in their churches and synagogues – communities of faith that exercise direct moral influence in society. Religion is about the meaning of our lives. It's about purpose and last things and our final destination. If we begin with God's love and the goal of heaven in mind, then we order our behavior in this life accordingly. We don't steal, we don't lie, we don't commit adultery; we don't deliberately kill the innocent; we help the poor, we comfort the sick, we shelter the homeless.

In contrast, the secular view of the world, by its nature, can't deal with questions of larger meaning. And by refusing to engage the questions that really matter in life, secularism robs us of the foundation for our dignity and our moral vocabulary. It robs our politics of the ideals that make us a nation and a people, rather than just a mob of individuals.

Americans are a religious people. A church-going people. We deny that at our peril. The more we try to drive religion out of our public life, the poorer we become and the less we have to offer in our engagement with the world.

We are more than simply "one nation under God." In the case of the United States -- in the light of our history and the founding ideas and documents that shaped us as a people -- we are one nation *because of our belief in God*.

There's no better form of citizenship than to carry our religious faith respectfully but confidently into the public square. What a person believes about God always shapes what he or she believes about people. Without God, there is a danger of no humanity, and politics without some place for God has too often led to inhumanity.

Pope John XXIII, who was so well loved by both Catholics and non-Catholics, once described the Catholic Church as the "soul of the world." Here in Denver, Catholics remember that. Here in Denver, Catholics believe that.

The role of the Church and her people -- along with every other person of good will -- is to serve the nation by helping it to remember and nourish its soul. That's what the Church is always about in her public service and in her public witness. Politics is the struggle for the soul of the world -- and that's why the Church and believing Catholics always will be, and always *should be*, politically engaged.