



Renewing Our Public Life

October 10, 2002

Denver Rotary Club gathering at the Denver Athletic Club

Let me start with two quick stories and some brief comments, and then I look forward to your questions and some time to talk.

Here's the first story: A friend of mine has a mentally disabled son. Part of her son's condition is that he has a lot of physical problems that go along with the mental disability. So she's always bringing him to the doctor, which means she spends a lot of her time arguing with her HMO about what is and what isn't covered by her medical insurance.

She earns about \$30,000 a year. She told me once that while it made her tired and angry to bicker with her insurance company about an unpaid \$20 or \$70 charge, what really set her off – what really *enraged* her – was reading about the \$1 million annual salary for the HMO's chief executive officer. The distance between her flesh and blood hardships on the ground, and HMO executives cruising at 40,000 feet, was so huge and so insulting that it became an even bigger injury than her unpaid bills.

Here's the second story: Over the past eight months, I've met and talked with hundreds of Catholics who are very rightly upset about the abuse scandal in the Church. A lot of our people are angry — especially parents — that a priest they trust might be capable of a terrible sexual crime against children. But what really incenses Catholics, what really *enrages* them, is the feeling that bishops who knew better did nothing to protect the faithful they were entrusted to lead. A lot of Catholics are far angrier at the American bishops than they are at the priests who actually committed the crimes.

Now I know a lot of successful business leaders, and most of them are good, decent men and women. I also know a lot of bishops, and none of them is indifferent or callous to the people he leads — in fact, all of the ones I know are men I also admire for their dedication.

But in the wake of Enron, Arthur Anderson, WorldCom, Adelphia, Tyco and a national sex abuse scandal, I think it's fair to say that we've got two big problems. The first is a problem of leadership in all our public institutions, not just business and religion. The second is a much deeper problem in American culture at large, a crisis in personal moral character at the grassroots level.

Let's talk about leadership first. What makes a good leader? Two things: character and competence. You need the professional skills necessary to the task; that's competence. And you need the moral conscience to use those skills properly; that's character.

A good leader creates a vision that other people can believe in and build together. And a good leader always acts honestly. Year after year, in almost every professional study, people rank honesty as the single most important quality in a leader. In 32 years, first as a priest and now as a bishop, I've seen again and again that people will accept almost any hardship or bad news if they know you're being straight with them.

Even more importantly, a good leader will put the needs of his people before his own. Being a pastor is very much like being a parent. If a father really loves his children, they'll know it, and they'll forgive him almost anything. And if a father doesn't love his children, they'll know that too, and they'll forgive him nothing. People followed Jesus of Nazareth because He lived for them, He died for them and He created hope for them. That's what a real leader looks like. And I think we don't see enough of that anywhere today in American public life.

Talented people who work honestly and creatively deserve to enjoy the fruits of their labor. Making a lot of money is not a moral problem for Catholics. But *how much is too much*, in the face of other people's poverty? And *what do we do with the money we earn*, in the face of other people's needs? The flaw in American leadership in 2002 is that, too often, it's disconnected from the people it serves, focused on short-term gain, and blind to the links between public behavior and personal moral integrity. And it's a flaw that's been growing for decades. Nixon and Watergate and Clinton and Lewinsky are different symptoms of the same illness.

The philosopher Hugo Grotius once said that, "A man cannot govern a nation if he cannot govern a city; he cannot govern a city if he cannot govern a family; he cannot govern a family unless he can govern himself; and he cannot govern himself unless his passions are subject to reason." And I'd add that a man's reason can't truly serve himself or anyone else until he roots it in a moral conscience.

As a citizen, I think one of the worst moments in recent political history was when John F. Kennedy promised a Texas audience that he'd keep his Catholic faith out of his public service. I think all Americans – not just Catholics – have been paying for that mistake for 40 years. It's one of the turning points in our community life where this unhealthy fracture between public behavior and personal belief began to grow.

I *want* my elected officials to inform their actions with their religious and moral beliefs, even if I don't agree with them. I want them to do it prudently and in a spirit of reasonable compromise — but on the hard issues, I *want* them to act on their principles, because then I can respect them. I can't respect and I can't trust an elected official, or any other leader, who claims that he or she personally believes one thing, but then publicly does another — whether the issue involves abortion or the death penalty or prescription medicines for the elderly or affordable housing for the poor.

One of the most interesting stories I've seen in the past decade was a little news item in the Denver Post back in December 1993. I was a bishop in South Dakota then, but I often read the Denver papers, and I've never forgotten this story. If you go to the parade ground at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, you'll see carved into a wall, in large letters, the academy honor code: *We will not lie, cheat or steal, nor tolerate among us anyone who does.* The Post reported in 1993 that because of the inadequate ethical formation of incoming cadets, the academy had established a sort of Morality 101 program to bring the cadets up to speed. These incoming cadets were the cream of American high schools, the cream of a generation that will run the country in 20 years – and many of them needed a remedial class in basic ethics.

Now that's a potential problem for every aspect of our national leadership, but it also points to the deeper problem in American life that I mentioned at the beginning. Americans now live in a country where marketing and entertainment run our popular culture. Every hour of every day we're sold the ideas that no matter how much we have, we need more right now; that freedom is the absence of commitments; that nothing lasts — especially relationships with other people; that "choice" is good even if the choices don't mean anything; and that authority is hypocritical.

I'm overstating things, but not by much. Just spend a couple of nights watching MTV or even the "adult" shows on network television. Or watch the car commercials for Mitsubishi or Nissan – they're really a kind of product worship.

When Adam Smith praised the rise of commerce two centuries ago, he did it in the context of a moral order that limited and guided the market. That moral order is much, much weaker today, and that's why Christopher Lasch and others have talked so critically about the market invading every aspect of our lives. We're very close to becoming what Lasch called a "culture of narcissism." We're living in an environment where the traditional American ideal of community — a group of people united in mutual concern around shared principles and hopes — is being replaced by a collection of individual appetites that are kept more or less constantly dissatisfied. Our marketing is too effective for our own good. It's teaching our young people to be permanently ungrateful and permanently self-centered. We have a lot of material things, but Americans are not a happy people.

John Adams once wrote, "Statesmen may plan and speculate for liberty, but it is religion and morality alone which can establish the principles upon which freedom can securely stand. The only foundation of a free constitution is pure virtue."

I want to quote Adams as I conclude my remarks because it's not enough to know we have a problem. The point is, *what can we do about it?* Well, if you do nothing else after our discussion today, go read David McCullough's terrific biography of John Adams. Adams was a founder of our country, and therefore we owe him for much of the freedom we enjoy today. But he also found a way to perfectly combine public service, moral character and religious faith. Adams always argued against slavery, and he did so because he felt that it violated human dignity, ignored the Gospel and was unworthy of a religious people. But I think the most revealing fact about Adams was his relationship with his wife Abigail. Adams loved his wife and his children with a tenderness and fidelity that spanned a lifetime. St. Augustine once said, "to be faithful in little things is a big thing." Adams never allowed the big demands of his public life to eclipse the seemingly "little" things that were really the *important* things — a devotion to his wife, his children, his friends and his God.

Devotion to family sounds like a simple thing, and it is. Gratitude, humility, faithfulness — these all are simple things. They're also very difficult. It's easy to talk about fixing the problems of American society with big national programs and policies, because we can always blame somebody else when they don't work.

Personal change, personal moral integrity, personal fidelity to people and principles — that's much harder work, because we're stuck with the clay of who we are, and there's nobody to blame but ourselves if we fail. But in persisting in these little things, we accomplish a big thing. *We affect others.* A reporter once asked Mother Teresa the secret of her success. She answered that she wasn't called to succeed, but only to try. Success was God's business. Trying was her business. She wasn't called to find big solutions to poverty, but to live the little solution of personal love that would become a good infection in the hearts of other people.

We each have that same vocation, especially all of you here today, because each of you in his or her own way is a leader. Our lives matter. We're here for a reason. One life, lived well, can begin to change the world.

So lead well, with honesty and vision and moral character and unselfishness. Lead well, not only with what you say, but with what you do — and in your example, that's where the renewal of American public life will begin.