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Addresses

## Acceptance Speech: Canterbury Award, Becket Fund

*New York City, NY (Becket Fund for Religious Liberty), May 7, 2009*

Thanks so much, Seamus. This is a wonderful award and a beautiful evening. That's partly because of the excellence of the Becket Fund staff and their work on all the details that go into a night like this. But it's also because of the people who are here – which means all of you, both the old friends and the new acquaintances. I'm very grateful for the effort you made to be here, and I'll repay your kindness by being brief.

By the way, when I was typing my remarks for tonight I misspelled "old friends" as "old fiends." So you may be in for a version of *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*.

I have a lot of people to thank, but I want to reserve that task to the end of my comments for reasons that will become clear. I do want to acknowledge, though, two of my predecessors in this award who are with us tonight – Carl Anderson and Jim Nicholson. It's a privilege to be measured by their standard of public witness. But I especially want to mention a past Canterbury medalist who couldn't be here. I know a lot of very good scholars, public servants and attorneys. But I don't know any who have the mix of grace, intelligence, faith, candor, clarity of conviction and personal character that translates into a Mary Ann Glendon. And I want to thank her for that publicly.

My job tonight is to talk about the importance of religious freedom, and our need to protect that freedom. More than any other country in the world, the United States is a nation that only really makes sense in a religion-friendly context. The writer Robert D. Kaplan, who has little use for soft-minded moralizing, once said that America has done so well for so long because her Founders had a tragic sense of history. They had few illusions about human perfectibility. And they got that spirit from the world of faith that shaped their experience.

The Founders certainly had hope in their ability to build a "new order of things" -- but only under the judgment of a Creator. In other words, they had a *sane* kind of hope; the biblical kind that's grounded in realism, because they also believed in sin. They had an unsentimental grasp of human nature as a mix of nobility, weakness and flaws that need to be constrained. And that kind of thinking had very practical, *political* results. American ideals *require* a certain kind of citizen to make them work. That's why John Adams said that "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

A friend of mine begins each new day by praying briefly over the Ten Commandments -- and not just the content of each Commandment individually, but also the way in which our common tradition structures them.

The first three Commandments outline our relationship with God. They tell us who's in charge, who isn't, and what that means for ordering our human behavior. The remaining seven proceed from the first three. They establish our duties to one another. But notice that God comes first, and there's a good reason for this. The First Commandment – *I am the Lord your God; you will not have foreign gods before me* – is the bedrock of our common moral heritage. All of our Western beliefs about the sanctity of life, human dignity and human rights ultimately depend on a Creator who guarantees them.

In other words, we have infinite value because God made us. No human being or political authority can revoke that infinite value. Only God is God. Every other little "godling" that poses as an answer

to human suffering and hope – from technology to political messiansim – is finally an impostor and a road away from God's light. Only God is God. There is no other.

I mention this because it stands in direct contrast to the spirit we're facing in our country right now. As C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Abolition of Man* and in his novel *That Hideous Strength*, science doesn't kill off superstition or barbarism. In fact, all three can get along quite comfortably.

The Western moral consensus has weakened over the past century, and at the same time, science has made big strides. But people *haven't* become more logical or ethically mature. The opposite has happened. The 20th century was the bloodiest in history, and today the occult is flourishing right alongside our computers and Blackberries -- especially among young people who've lost the vocabulary to understand the gravity of the forces they play with.

Knowledge is merely knowledge. Power is merely power. Nothing inherent to knowledge or power guarantees that it will translate into wisdom or justice or mercy. This is why our current President's inauguration speech has stayed with me so vividly in the months since January. He said:

*"We will restore science to its rightful place, and wield technology's wonders to raise health care's quality and lower its cost. We will harness the sun and the winds and the soil to fuel our cars and run our factories. And we will transform our schools and colleges and universities to meet the demands of a new age. All this we can do. And all this we will do."*

It's useful to check those words against the opening words of another text, *Dignitatis Personae: On Certain Bioethical Questions*, issued last December by the Holy See:

*"The dignity of a person must be recognized in every human being from conception to natural death. This fundamental principle expresses a great 'yes' to human life, and must be at the center of ethical reflections on biomedical research, which has an ever greater importance in today's world."*

The President and his supporters have stressed his religious credentials many times. Faith has clearly played a significant role in his life. It's one of the factors that made him attractive to voters last fall. The data consistently show by a wide margin that Americans want their president to be a religious person.

But from a believer's point of view, that makes the President's confusion about the "rightful place" of science – not just in his inaugural remarks, but in many of his words and actions since then -- even more curious. Only God is God. There is no other. Every serious believer knows this. It's the anchor of our identity. Therefore the rightful place of science, like all human activity, is in the service of human dignity, and under the judgment of God's justice. Science can *never* stand outside or above moral judgment. And people of faith can *never* be neutral or silent about its uses. Otherwise, sooner or later -- but unavoidably – human beings, their rights and their dignity pay the price.

My point here is very simple. American public life can't work as its Founders and Framers intended if we stick religion in the closet like a dangerously eccentric in-law. America doesn't need to be a "Christian" country. But it can't survive without being a nation predisposed and welcoming to religious faith. We've never had a nationally established Church, and that's a good thing. But as the historian Paul Johnson once said, America was never imagined "as a secular state, [but rather as a] moral and ethical society without a state religion."

In other words, we were founded as a *religious* people, but with public institutions that avoid religious tests. American public life *depends for its life* on Jews and Protestants and Latter Day Saints and Catholics and *all* religious believers vigorously advancing their convictions in public debate. We need to do that peacefully and respectfully, *but we need to do it* -- without evasions or apologies or alibis. Otherwise we're stealing the most precious things we have – our religious faith and our moral character – from the struggle for the common good. And the God who loves us will nonetheless hold us accountable for that cowardice.

Freedom of religious faith is woven into our founding documents. It's hardwired into the assumptions of all of us who treasure the privilege of being an American. I never really understood what that freedom meant, though, until I served on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and saw what its absence looks like; until I understood from the facts and from my own eyes the systematic abuse of religious believers that takes place in so many countries around the globe. Some of that same contempt for religious faith and disdain for serious religious believers is now part

of our own national dialogue. And we underestimate it at our own great cost.

Article 18 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* says, "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." In this country, we take that article seriously. But times change, and nations change. The freedom of faith we all enjoy in this country needs to be earned and defended by all of us, again and again, or we'll lose it. Nothing – outside of God's love – ever guarantees *anybody's* freedom. Freedom needs to be purchased with a constant witness of courage, intelligence and action.

I look out on this group tonight and see Muslims, Mormons, Jews, Protestants, Hindus Catholics and others. One of the gifts of the Becket Fund's work for religious liberty is the friendship we discover with so many good and honorable people from so many different traditions. It's another reminder that God is bigger than all of our differences.

There are so many people here tonight I admire: George Weigel, Bill McGurn, Michael Novak, Russ Shaw, Jody Bottum, Robby George, my friends Diana and Wayne Murdy, Joan and Ned Desmond, Ann Corkery and so many others; forgive me -- I can't name everyone or we'll be here all night. I admire you because you're good warriors, and it's a privilege to be your friend. I'm grateful to Trace Murphy and Doubleday for encouraging a book on faith and public life like *Render Unto Caesar*; and to Scott Browning, Chuck Goldberg, Martin Nussbaum and Jim Lyons at our law firm Rothgerber, Johnson and Lyons for always fighting so hard and so very well for the rights of the Catholic community in public life.

Public awards are so often empty gestures or just another excuse to raise money and have fun for a cause. But not this award. This one matters. Your being here matters. It matters because the Becket Fund and its work for religious liberty matter – not just a little, but enormously; and not just for Christians or Muslims or Jews, but for every American religious believer and for all our citizens, whether they know it or not.

The attorneys and staff who make the Becket Fund so effective are not just another group of talented people doing good work. Their work is more than "good." It's vital. We can't afford to take them for granted because their service is too valuable, and the issues they handle are too important. So Seamus, I began by thanking you, and I'll end the same way. Thank you for your example. God bless you for your leadership. And God bless the people and the work of the Becket Fund.