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Addresses

## Acceptance Remarks to the Envoy Institute

*Belmont Abbey, Charlotte, North Carolina (October 8, 2009)*

Thank you for being here tonight. I'm very grateful for this award -- although I need to share with you a quick story. You know, mothers are wonderful tutors in the virtue of humility. Some years ago, when my own mother was still alive, I got a very kind local award in Denver, and I telephoned my mother to tell her. Her response was instructive. She said, "That's marvelous son, but why did they give it *to you?*"

Mothers have the gift of helping their sons see how implausible it is to imagine oneself as a big shot. So the lesson I've learned is this: The greatest value of this award, or any other award in life, is the generosity of the friends who bestow it.

I've been a priest for nearly 40 years. One of the satisfactions God has given me is the number of extraordinary men and women I know as friends. Friendship is the heart of every Christian vocation, from married life to the priesthood. My life has been filled with it. And many of the people I admire most are here tonight: My friend Patrick Madrid and his great witness with the Envoy Institute and Envoy magazine; my friends George Weigel and Jody Bottum; the kind messages from Carl Anderson and Father Corapi; friends from Belmont Abbey and the Becket Fund; and so many more of you that I can't name or we'd be here all night. This is what makes life rich.

People can sometimes earn the respect of others by their actions. But nobody *earns* the love at the heart of a real Christian friendship. That's a gift. It can't be forced. It's freely withheld or freely given. And when it's given, it means more than any award. So again, I thank you sincerely for this kindness tonight -- but I'm much more grateful for the friendship all of us share.

My mother taught me the virtue of mercy along with the importance of humility, so my comments tonight will be brief.

I have three simple points I want to talk about: the nature of the state; the nature of our Christian faith; and the nature of the lay vocation. But before I do that, I need to offer two caveats.

Here's the first caveat. *I love this country.* Some of you know that I belong to the Potawatomi Indian tribe through my mother. I take great pride in that. Because of it, I'm very well aware of the sins and flaws of American history -- both toward the native peoples of the United States, and often toward other countries. But I also know the great generosity and goodness in America, and I believe in the genius of America's political institutions. I take great pride in that, as well. We all should.

Here's my second caveat. *No bishop, priest or deacon can do the work that properly belongs to laypeople.* My job as a bishop is to be a good pastor -- in other words, a good shepherd and guide for the people of my local Church. The word "pastor" means "shepherd" in Latin, and it comes from the Latin verb *pascere*, which means "to feed." My proper work is to teach the faith, preach the Gospel, encourage and console my people, correct them when needed, and govern the internal life of the Church with love and justice.

There may be many times when a bishop or group of bishops needs to speak out publicly about the moral consequences of a public issue. But the main form of Catholic leadership in wider society -- in the nation's political, economic and social life -- needs to be done by you, the Catholic lay faithful. The key word of course is *faithful*. We need to form Catholic lay leaders who know and love the teachings

of the Church, and then embody those teachings faithfully in their private lives and in their public service. But once those lay leaders exist, clergy cannot and should not interfere with the leadership that rightly belongs, by baptism, to their vocation as lay apostles.

Having said this, I want to turn now to those three simple points I mentioned: the nature of the state; the nature of our Christian faith; and the nature of the lay vocation.

Here's my first point: *the nature of the state*. I said a moment ago that I love this country. I meant it. America is a *great* nation; a *good* nation. This is my home, and I know all of you feel the same. For Christians, patriotism is a virtue. Love for the best qualities in our homeland is a noble thing. This is why military service and public office are not just socially useful vocations, but – at their best – great and honorable ones.

Beginning in the New Testament and continuing right through works of the Second Vatican Council, Christians have always believed that civil authority has a rightful degree of autonomy separate from sacred authority. In Christian thought, believers owe civil rulers their respect and obedience in all things that do not gravely violate the moral law. When Jesus told the Pharisees and Herodians to “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (see Mt 22: 15-21), he was acknowledging that Caesar does have rights.

Of course, he was *also* saying that Caesar is not a god, and Caesar has no rights over those things which belong to God.

To put it in modern terms: *The state is not god*. It's not immortal. It's not infallible. It's not even synonymous with civil society, which is much larger, richer and more diverse in its human relationships than any political party or government bureaucracy can ever be. And ultimately, everything important about human life belongs not to Caesar, but to God: our intellect, our talents, our free will; the people we love; the beauty and goodness in the world; our soul, our moral integrity, our hope for eternal life. These are the things that matter. These are the things worth fighting for. And none of them comes from the state.

As a result, the key virtue modern political leaders need to learn -- and Catholic citizens need to *help* them learn it by demanding it -- is modesty; modesty of appetite, and modesty in the exercise of power. The sovereignty of states is a good principle. But every state is subject to higher and binding truths.

Here's my second point: *the nature of our Christian faith*. What we believe has consequences. Catholics believe that each human life has a unique but interrelated meaning. We were made by God to receive love ourselves, and *to show love to others*. That's why we're here. That's our purpose. And our purpose has very practical consequences -- including the political kind. The Christian vocation to love each other is never simply an emotion, or it isn't real. Real love is an act of the will; a sustained choice that proves itself not just by what we say or feel, but by *what we do for the good of others*.

Working to defend the sanctity of human persons and the dignity of the human family is an obligation of Christian love. Therefore, the Church can't be silent in public life and be faithful to Jesus Christ at the same time. She needs to be a mustard seed in the public square, transforming every fiber of a nation's social, economic and political life.

Here's my third and final point: *the nature of the lay vocation*. In May this year, speaking to a pastoral convention of the Diocese of Rome, Benedict XVI made a comment that many people overlooked. But I think his words have exactly the right spirit to guide us, beginning tonight.

He said that the Church needs “a change in mindset, particularly concerning laypeople. They must no longer be viewed as ‘collaborators’ of the clergy, but truly recognized as ‘co-responsible’ for the Church’s being and action, thereby fostering the consolidation of a mature and committed laity.”

Christians are in the world, but not of the world. We belong to God, and our home is heaven. But we're here for a reason: to *change* the world, *for the sake of the world*, in the name of Jesus Christ. That work belongs *to each of us*. Nobody else will do it for us. And the idea that we can somehow accomplish that work of changing the world without engaging -- in a hands-on way -- the laws, the structures, the public policies, the habits of mind and the root causes that sustain injustice in our nation, is a delusion.

Laypeople are not second-class disciples in this task. There's no such creature as a “second-class”

Christian. Baptism is a sacrament of redemption; but also of equality in God's love. Laypeople have *exactly the same dignity as clergy and religious* -- and this moment in history cries out for mature, intelligent, zealous and faithful lay leaders like Patrick Madrid and all of the rest of you in this audience tonight in an urgent way. Every Christian life, and *every choice* in every Christian life, *matters eternally*. Laypeople, not clergy, have the primary task of struggling for the soul of the secular world. And only you can do it as God intended. The good news is that you're not alone -- and you're also not the first.

A Catholic layman once wrote that: "Without morals a republic cannot subsist any length of time; they therefore who are decrying the Christian religion, whose morality is so sublime and pure . . . are undermining the solid foundation of morals, the best security for the duration of free governments."

That layman was Charles Carroll, the only Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence, the first Catholic U.S. senator, and a cousin to the first Catholic bishop in the United States, John Carroll. As a Catholic attorney in then-Protestant America, Charles Carroll knew the sting of professional discrimination and religious prejudice firsthand. But he believed in the soul of this country. He served its best principles. And he demanded and worked tirelessly for his freedom to live and worship as a Catholic.

Today the bigots we face are different. Caesar wears a different suit. He has great media handlers. He bullies religion while he claims to respect it. He talks piously about the law and equality and tolerance and fairness. But he still confuses himself with God -- and he still violates the rights of Catholic believers and institutions by intruding himself where he has no right to be.

It's one of the great ironies of the moment that tiny Belmont Abbey would have the courage to challenge Caesar over its right to be faithfully Catholic in its policies, while so many other American Catholics seem eager to give Caesar honors. But God is a God of ironies, as the Philistines discovered, among others.

One of the deepest truths of the human predicament is this: If you stand up to evil, you may lose. But if you *don't* stand up, you *will* lose. Belmont Abbey, to its very great credit, has the character to stand up and defend its right to be Catholic. The Becket Fund stands with it. Patrick Madrid and the Envoy Institute have been standing up for the Catholic faith for many years. We have the duty to support all of them with our prayers, our financial resources and pressure on our public officials to stop today's government interference with the identity and policies of faithful Catholic institutions.

I want to close with one of my favorite stories from history. It's about an emperor -- a good Christian emperor -- just to show I have no ill will toward Caesar. In the early Fifth Century the Huns had a very lucrative blackmail operation going against both the Western and Eastern Roman Empires. Every year a Hunnic delegation would show up in Constantinople threatening to invade. And every year -- out of Roman weakness and cowardice -- they'd leave with a big payoff.

Then a new man came to the throne. His name was Marcian. He was a former general. And when the Huns showed up the next year for their tribute, he gave them a simple lesson in economics. He said, "I have gold for my friends, and steel for my enemies." Then he threw them out. The Huns thought about it for awhile. Then they turned west for easier targets.

Of course today we live in different times, don't we. But there's a lesson here, even today, for Catholics and all religious believers. If we stand up to evil, we may lose. But if we *don't* stand up we *will* lose. Our God is a God of justice; a God who does not abandon his people and who rewards courage in the face of evil. So have courage, serve the truth, love the Church, take confidence in the Lord, and stand up to witness for your faith. We've got nothing to lose. We have everything to gain. Thanks, and God bless you.