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Addresses

The Vocation of Christians In American Public Life

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One of the ironies in my talk tonight is this. I'm a Catholic bishop, speaking at a Baptist university in America's Protestant heartland. But I've been welcomed with more warmth and friendship than I might find at a number of Catholic venues. This is a fact worth discussing. I'll come back to it at the end of my comments. But I want to begin by thanking Drs. Sloan and Bonicelli and the leadership of Houston Baptist University for their extraordinary kindness in having me here tonight. I'm very grateful for their friendship.

I also want to thank my friend Dr. John Hittinger of the University of St. Thomas. Part of my pleasure in being here is to encourage his efforts with the John Paul II Forum on the Church in the Modern World. The Forum is hugely important – and not just for Catholics, but for the whole Christian community. I'm grateful to the leadership of the University of St. Thomas for supporting him.

I need to offer a few caveats before I turn to the substance of our discussion.

The first caveat is this: My thoughts tonight are purely my own. I don't speak for the Holy See, or the American Catholic bishops, or the Houston Catholic community. In the Catholic tradition, the local bishop is the chief preacher and teacher of the faith, and the shepherd of the local Church. Here in Houston you have an outstanding bishop – a man of great Christian faith and intellect – in Cardinal Daniel DiNardo. In all things Catholic tonight, I'm glad to defer to his leadership.

Here's my second caveat: I'm here as a *Catholic* Christian and an *American* citizen – in that order. Both of these identities are important. They don't need to conflict. They are not, however, the same thing. And they do not have the same weight. I love my country. I revere the genius of its founding documents and its public institutions. But no nation, not even the one I love, has a right to my allegiance, or my silence, in matters that belong to God or that undermine the dignity of the human persons He created.

My third caveat is this: Catholics and Protestants have different memories of American history. The historian Paul Johnson once wrote that America was “born Protestant.”¹ That's clearly true. Whatever America is today or may become tomorrow, its *origin* was deeply shaped by a Protestant Christian spirit, and the fruit of that spirit has been, on the balance, a great blessing for humanity. But it's also true that, while Catholics have always thrived in the United States, they lived through two centuries of discrimination, religious bigotry and occasional violence. Protestants of course will remember things quite differently. They will remember Catholic persecution of dissenters in Europe, the entanglements of the Roman Church and state power, and papal suspicion of democracy and religious liberty.

We can't erase those memories. And we cannot – nor should we try to – paper over the issues that still divide us as believers in terms of doctrine, authority and our understandings of the Church. Ecumenism based on good manners instead of truth is empty. It's also a form of lying. If we share a love of Jesus Christ and a familial bond in baptism and God's Word, then on a fundamental level, we're brothers and sisters. Members of a family owe each other more than surface courtesies. We owe each other the kind of fraternal respect that “speak[s] the truth in love” (Eph 4:15). We also *urgently* owe each other solidarity and support in dealing with a culture that increasingly derides religious faith in general, and the Christian faith in particular. And that brings me to the heart of what I want to share with you.

Our theme tonight is the vocation of Christians in American public life. That's a pretty broad canvas. Broad enough that I wrote a book about it. Tonight I want to focus in a special way on the role of Christians in our country's civic and political life. The key to our discussion will be that word "vocation." It comes from the Latin word *vocare*, which means, "to call." Christians believe that God calls each of us individually, and all of us as a believing community, to know, love and serve him in our daily lives.

But there's more. He also asks us to make disciples of all nations. That means we have a duty to preach Jesus Christ. We have a mandate to share his Gospel of truth, mercy, justice and love. These are mission words; *action* words. They're not optional. And they have practical consequences for the way we think, speak, make choices and live our lives, not just at home but in the public square. Real Christian faith is always personal, but it's never private. And we need to think about that simple fact in light of an anniversary.

Fifty years ago this fall, in September 1960, Sen. John F. Kennedy, the Democratic candidate for president, spoke to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association. He had one purpose. He needed to convince 300 uneasy Protestant ministers, and the country at large, that a Catholic like himself could serve loyally as our nation's chief executive. Kennedy convinced the country, if not the ministers, and went on to be elected. And his speech left a lasting mark on American politics. It was sincere, compelling, articulate – and wrong. Not wrong about the patriotism of Catholics, but wrong about American history and very wrong about the role of religious faith in our nation's life. And he wasn't merely "wrong." His Houston remarks profoundly undermined the place not just of Catholics, but of *all* religious believers, in America's public life and political conversation. Today, half a century later, we're paying for the damage.

Now those are strong statements. So I'll try to explain them by doing three things. First, I want to look at the problems in what Kennedy actually said. Second, I want to reflect on what a proper Christian approach to politics and public service might look like. And last, I want to examine where Kennedy's speech has led us – in other words, the realities we face today, and what Christians need to do about those realities.

John Kennedy was a great speaker. Ted Sorensen, who helped craft the Houston speech, was a gifted writer. As a result, it's easy to speed-read Kennedy's Houston remarks as a passionate appeal for tolerance. But the text has at least two big flaws.² The first is political and historical. The second is religious.

Early in his remarks, Kennedy said: "I believe in an America where the separation of Church and state is absolute." Given the distrust historically shown to Catholics in this country, his words were shrewdly chosen. The trouble is, the Constitution doesn't say that. The Founders and Framers didn't believe that. And the history of the United States contradicts that. Unlike revolutionary leaders in Europe, the American Founders looked quite favorably on religion. Many were believers themselves. In fact, one of the main reasons for writing the First Amendment's Establishment Clause – the clause that bars any federally-endorsed Church – was that several of the Constitution's Framers wanted to protect the publicly funded *Protestant* Churches they *already had* in their own states. John Adams actually preferred a "mild and equitable establishment of religion" and helped draft that into the 1780 Massachusetts Constitution.³

America's Founders encouraged mutual support between religion and government. Their reasons were practical. In their view, a republic like the United States needs a virtuous people to survive. Religious faith, rightly lived, forms virtuous people. Thus, the modern, drastic sense of the "separation of Church and state" had little force in American consciousness until Justice Hugo Black excavated it from a private letter President Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1802 to the Danbury Baptist Association.⁴ Justice Black then used Jefferson's phrase in the Supreme Court's *Everson v. Board of Education* decision in 1947.

The date of that Court decision is important, because America's Catholic bishops wrote a wonderful pastoral letter one year later – in 1948 – called "The Christian in Action." It's worth reading. In that letter, the bishops did two things. They strongly endorsed American democracy and religious freedom. They also strongly challenged Justice Black's logic in *Everson*.

The bishops wrote that "It would be an utter distortion of American history and law" to force the nation's public institutions into an "indifference to religion and the exclusion of cooperation between

religion and government . . ." They rejected Justice Black's harsh new sense of the separation of Church and state as a "shibboleth of doctrinaire secularism."⁵ And the bishops argued their case from the *facts* of American history.

The value of remembering that pastoral statement tonight is this: Kennedy referenced the 1948 bishops' letter in his Houston comments. He wanted to prove the deep Catholic support for American democracy. And rightly so. But he *neglected to* mention that the same bishops, in the same letter, repudiated the new and radical kind of separation doctrine he was preaching.

The Houston remarks also created a *religious* problem. To his credit, Kennedy said that if his duties as President should "ever require me to violate my conscience or violate the national interest, I would resign the office." He also warned that he would not "disavow my views or my church in order to win this election." But in its *effect*, the Houston speech did exactly that. It began the project of walling religion away from the process of governance in a new and aggressive way. It also divided a person's private beliefs from his or her public duties. And it set "the national interest" over and against "outside religious pressures or dictates."

For his audience of Protestant ministers, Kennedy's stress on personal conscience may have sounded familiar and reassuring. But what Kennedy *actually* did, according to Jesuit scholar Mark Massa, was something quite alien and new. He "'secularize[d]' the American presidency in order to win it." In other words, "[P]recisely because Kennedy was not an adherent of that mainstream Protestant religiosity that had created and buttressed the 'plausibility structures' of [American] political culture at least since Lincoln, he had to 'privatize' presidential religious belief – including and especially his own – in order to win that office."⁶

In Massa's view, the kind of secularity pushed by the Houston speech "represented a near total privatization of religious belief – so much a privatization that religious observers from both sides of the Catholic/Protestant fence commented on its remarkable atheistic implications for public life and discourse." And the irony -- again as told by Massa -- is that some of the same people who worried publicly about Kennedy's Catholic faith got a result very different from the one they expected. In effect, "the raising of the [Catholic] issue itself went a considerable way toward 'secularizing' the American public square by privatizing personal belief. The very effort to 'safeguard' the [essentially Protestant] religious aura of the presidency . . . contributed in significant ways to its secularization."

Fifty years after Kennedy's Houston speech, we have more Catholics in national public office than ever before. But I wonder if we've ever had *fewer* of them who can coherently explain how their faith informs their work, or who even feel obligated to try. The life of our country is no more "Catholic" or "Christian" than it was 100 years ago. In fact it's arguably less so. And at least one of the reasons for it is this: Too many Catholics confuse their personal opinions with a real Christian conscience. Too many live their faith as if it were a private idiosyncrasy – the kind that they'll never allow to become a public nuisance. And too many just don't really believe. Maybe it's different in Protestant circles. But I hope you'll forgive me if I say, "I doubt it."

John Kennedy didn't create the trends in American life that I've described. But at least for Catholics, his Houston speech clearly fed them. Which brings me to the second point of my talk: What would a *proper* Christian approach to politics look like? John Courtney Murray, the Jesuit scholar who spoke so forcefully about the dignity of American democracy and religious freedom, once wrote: "The Holy Spirit does not descend into the City of Man in the form of a dove. He comes only in the endlessly energetic spirit of justice and love that dwells in the man of the City, the layman."⁷

Here's what that means. Christianity is not *mainly* – or even significantly -- about politics. It's about living and sharing the love of God. And Christian political engagement, when it happens, is never *mainly* the task of the clergy. That work belongs to lay believers who live most intensely in the world. Christian faith is not a set of ethics or doctrines. It's not a group of theories about social and economic justice. All these things have their place. All of them can be important. But a Christian life begins in a relationship with Jesus Christ; and it bears fruit in the justice, mercy and love we show to others because of that relationship.

Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets" (Mt 22: 37-40). That's the test of our faith, and without a passion for Jesus Christ in our hearts that reshapes our lives, Christianity is just a word game and a legend. *Relationships have consequences.* A mar-

ried man will commit himself to certain actions and behaviors, no matter what the cost, out of the love he bears for his wife. Our relationship with God is the same. We need to live and prove our love by our actions, not just in our personal and family lives, but also in the public square. Therefore Christians individually and the Church as a believing community engage the political order as *an obligation of the Word of God*. Human law teaches and forms as well as regulates; and human politics is the exercise of power – which means both have moral implications that the Christian cannot ignore and still remain faithful to his vocation as a light to the world (Mt 5:14-16).

Robert Dodaro, the Augustinian priest and scholar, wrote a wonderful book a few years ago called *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine*. In his book and elsewhere, Dodaro makes four key points about Augustine's view of Christianity and politics.⁸

First, Augustine never really offers a political theory, and there's a reason. He doesn't believe human beings can know or create perfect justice in this world. Our judgment is always flawed by our sinfulness. Therefore, the right starting point for any Christian politics is humility, modesty and a very sober realism. Second, no political order, no matter how seemingly good, can ever constitute a just society. Errors in moral judgment can't be avoided. These errors also grow exponentially in their complexity as they move from lower to higher levels of society and governance. Therefore the Christian needs to be loyal to her nation and obedient to its legitimate rulers. But she also needs to cultivate a critical vigilance about both. Third, despite these concerns, Christians still have a duty to take part in public life according to their God-given abilities, even when their faith brings them into conflict with public authority. We can't simply ignore or withdraw from civic affairs. The reason is simple. The classic civic virtues named by Cicero – prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance – can be renewed and elevated, to the benefit of all citizens, by the Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity. Therefore, political engagement is a worthy Christian task, and public office is an honorable Christian vocation. Fourth, in governing as best they can, while conforming their lives and their judgment to the content of the Gospel, Christian leaders in public life *can* accomplish real good, and they *can* make a difference. Their success will always be limited and mixed. It will never be ideal. But with the help of God they can improve the moral quality of society, which makes the effort invaluable.

What Augustine believes about Christian leaders, we can reasonably extend to the vocation of all Christian citizens. The skills of the Christian citizen are finally very simple: a zeal for Jesus Christ and his Church; a conscience formed in humility and rooted in Scripture and the believing community; the prudence to see which issues in public life are vital and foundational to human dignity, and which ones are not; and the courage to work for what's right. We don't cultivate these skills alone. We develop them together as Christians, in prayer, on our knees, in the presence of Jesus Christ – and also in discussions like tonight.

Now before ending, I want to turn briefly to the third point I mentioned earlier in my talk: the realities we face today, and what Christians need to do about them. As I was preparing these comments for tonight, I listed all the urgent issues that demand our attention as believers: abortion; immigration; our obligations to the poor, the elderly and the disabled; questions of war and peace; our national confusion about sexual identity and human nature, and the attacks on marriage and family life that flow from this confusion; the growing disconnection of our science and technology from real moral reflection; the erosion of freedom of conscience in our national health-care debates; the content and quality of the schools that form our children.

The list is long. I believe abortion is the foundational human rights issue of our lifetime. We need to do everything we can to support women in their pregnancies and to end the legal killing of unborn children. We may want to remember that the Romans had a *visceral* hatred for Carthage not because Carthage was a commercial rival, or because its people had a different language and customs. The Romans hated Carthage above all because its people sacrificed their infants to Ba'al. For the Romans, who themselves were a hard people, that was a unique kind of wickedness and barbarism. As a nation, we might profitably ask ourselves whom and what we've really been worshipping in our 40 million "legal" abortions since 1973.

All of these issues that I've listed above divide our country and our Churches in a way Augustine would have found quite understandable. The City of God and the City of Man overlap in this world. Only God knows who finally belongs to which. But in the meantime, in seeking to live the Gospel we claim to believe, we find friends and brothers in unforeseen places, unlikely places; and when that happens, even a foreign place can seem like one's home.

The vocation of Christians in American public life does not have a Baptist or Catholic or Greek

Orthodox or any other brand-specific label. John 14:6 – “I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me” – which is so key to the identity of Houston Baptist University, burns just as hot in this heart, and the heart of every Catholic who truly understands his faith. Our job is to love God, preach Jesus Christ, serve and defend God’s people, and sanctify the world as his agents. To do that work, we need to be one. Not “one” in pious words or good intentions, but *really one, perfectly one*, in mind and heart and action, as Christ intended. This is what Jesus meant when he said, “I do not pray for these only, but also those who believe in me through their word, *that they may all be one*; even as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (Jn17:20-21).

We live in a country that was once – despite its sins and flaws -- deeply shaped by Christian faith. It can be so again. But we will do that together, or we won’t do it at all. We need to remember the words of St. Hilary from so long ago: *Unum sunt, qui invicem sunt*. “They are one, who are wholly for each other.”⁹ May God grant us the grace to love each other, support each other and live *wholly for each other* in Jesus Christ – so that we might work together in renewing the nation that has served human freedom so well.

Endnotes:

1. Paul Johnson, "An Almost-Chosen People," First Things, June/July 2006; adapted from his Erasmus Lecture
2. Full text of the Kennedy Houston speech is available online from the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum
3. John Witte, Jr., "From Establishment to Freedom of Public Religion," Emory University School of Law, Public Law and Legal Theory Research Paper Series, Research Paper No. 04-1, 2003, p. 5
4. Ibid., p. 2-3
5. U.S. Catholic bishops, pastoral letter, "The Christian in Action," No. 11, 1948; see also Nos. 12-18; reprinted in *Pastoral Letters of the American Hierarchy, 1792-1970*, Hugh J. Nolan, editor, Our Sunday Visitor, 1971
6. Mark Massa, S.J.; quotations from Massa are from "A Catholic for President? John F. Kennedy and the 'Secular' Theology of the Houston Speech, 1960," *Journal of Church and State*, Spring 1997
7. John Courtney Murray, S.J., "The Role of Faith in the Renovation of the World," 1948; Murray's works are available online from the Woodstock Theological Center Library
8. Robert Dodaro, O.S.A.; see private correspondence with speaker, along with *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine*, Cambridge University Press, 2008 (first published in 2004), and "Ecclesia and Res Publica: How Augustinian Are Neo-Augustinian Politics?," collected in *Augustine and Post-Modern Thought: A New Alliance Against Modernity?*, Peeters, editor, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium , 2009
9. Referenced in Murray, "The Construction of a Christian Culture;" essay originally delivered as three talks in 1940, available online as noted above.