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Addresses

Address to Pew Forum for Religion & Public Life

Washington, D.C., March 17, 2009

I'll keep my remarks brief so we have plenty of time for discussion. I'll also be candid -- as I hope you'll be -- because as long as people treat each other with charity and respect, the virtue of honesty is always the best way to have a useful conversation.

Michael Cromartie has asked me to speak about the political obligations of Catholics. I'm happy to do that. But I hope you won't mind if I back into the subject. I don't often get a chance for a real exchange with journalists, so I'll start with some thoughts on how the media cover the Catholic Church. The reason is simple. Public understanding of the Catholic role in our political process depends, in large part, on how the mainstream media frame Church-related issues.

I don't know if any of you had the chance to cover Mother Teresa when she visited this country over the years. She once joked that she'd rather bathe a leper than meet the press. Mother was not known for the ambiguity of her feelings. And a lot of people in the Church, especially those who practice their faith in an active and regular manner, would agree with what she meant because they feel the same way.

Now it turns out that I don't feel the same way. In my experience, dealing with the press has usually been rather enjoyable. I've worked with some very good journalists. I don't think we should ever fear the truth. And I tend to like challenging questions.

But I also know reporters and editors who were, and are, uniquely frustrating -- not because they write bad things about the Church, and not because they lack skill or intelligence. It's because too often they really don't know their subject; or they dislike the influence of religion; or they have unresolved authority issues; or they resent Catholic teachings on sex; or they'd rather be covering the White House, but this is the only beat they could get.

I don't expect journalists who track the Church to agree with everything she teaches. But I do think reporters should have a working knowledge of her traditions and teachings. I do think editors should have the basic Catholic vocabulary needed to grasp what we're talking about, and why we're talking about it. Too often, they don't. And here's a very simple example. In 20 years as a bishop, I've never had a single reporter ask me why I so often refer to the Church as "she" and "her," instead of "it," just as I'm doing today. I find that extremely odd, because those pronouns go straight to the heart of Catholic theology, life and identity.

Let me share with you two of my assumptions about the role of the media in a free society.

Here's assumption number one: The media -- and I mean here the news media, not necessarily all media -- serve a vital role in American life. The reason is obvious. A democracy depends on the free flow of truthful and comprehensive information between government and the governed. Public debate has little meaning when people don't have accurate, unbiased information.

Here's my second assumption: Journalism is a vocation, not just a job. Pursued properly, journalism should enjoy the same dignity as the law or medicine because the service that journalists perform is equally important to a healthy society. Journalists have a duty to serve the truth and the common good, not just the crowd, not just the shareholders they work for, and not just their own personal convictions. In other words, your "core business" as journalists is to explain in an honest way, with

an honest context, the forces and characters shaping our lives.

This is why I admire good reporting. It has social and moral gravity. And thankfully, many journalists are experts in their fields. But that expertise doesn't seem to extend to religion coverage. John Allen and Eric Gorski do outstanding work. Terry Mattingly and his colleagues offer a wonderful tool for understanding the interplay of the media, news and religion at Getreligion.org. Sandro Magister at *l'Espresso* and Alejandro Bermudez at *ACI-Prensa* both offer excellent and well informed international reporting on religious affairs.

But for many Catholics, these journalists, and others like them, seem to be the exceptions. No serious media organization would assign a reporter to cover Wall Street if that reporter lacked a background in economics, fiscal and monetary policy, and these days, at least some expertise in Keynesian theory. But reporters who don't know their subject and haven't done their homework seem common in the world of religion reporting.

I wrote my book *Render Unto Caesar* to answer the question we're talking about today: "What are the political obligations of Catholics?" My answer is very simple: The political duty of Catholics is to be "Catholic" first – to know their faith, and to think and act like faithful Catholics all the time. That includes their life in the public square – which means it also includes an obligation to promote policies and candidates that reflect the natural law, the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the social and moral teachings of his Church.

To put it another way, we serve Caesar best when we serve God first. And that means living our Catholic beliefs vigorously, faithfully and without apologies, at home and in public, at work and in the voting booth. We can't ignore the suffering of the poor or the homeless or undocumented immigrants, and then claim to be good Catholics. We also can't ignore the killing of unborn children without struggling to end that daily homicide – not just through supportive social policies, but by changing the law. The law not only regulates; it also teaches. The current law of the United States teaches that it can be acceptable to kill an unborn child. But it isn't acceptable. It never was. It never will be. And Catholics can't make peace with this kind of deeply evil law without lying to themselves, lying to the believing community and trying to fool God. It doesn't work.

When reporters talked with me last fall about *Render Unto Caesar*, I learned that (a) many hadn't really read it; (b) many lacked even a basic understanding of Catholic identity that you need for a useful disagreement; and (c) many weren't interested in learning what they didn't know. At the same time, some did unfortunately know what they planned to write before they walked into my office for the interview.

Render Unto Caesar was never designed to encourage Catholics to be Democrats or Republicans. But I certainly do want to remind American Catholics what it requires to actually be "Catholic," to reason as Catholics, and to act as Catholics. The Church is not a political organism. But the moral witness of the Church – when people take her seriously -- will always have political consequences. If a particular party doesn't like those consequences, well unfortunately, that's the party's problem. It's the party's own fault based on its own choices. It's not the fault of the Church. Nor is it the job of the Church to help the careers of Catholic public officials by removing inconvenient moral dilemmas.

Where the media see a Catholic politician, Catholic bishops see a soul. For a bishop, the question of Catholics in American public life is only secondarily about electoral politics. Really it's a question of eschatology. That's another word that should be in every religion journalist's vocabulary but usually isn't. Eschatology refers to "last things"—heaven and hell; salvation and judgment. It reflects the teaching of Jesus: that what we do in this life has consequences for the life to come.

That's what the debate over who receives the Eucharist in 2004, 2008 and even today has finally been about. Sometimes in reading the news, I get the impression that access to Holy Communion in the Church is like having bar privileges at the Elks' Club. I'm reminded of the story of the Catholic novelist Flannery O'Connor. She was at a cocktail party talking with fellow writer Mary McCarthy, who had left the Church. McCarthy, though no longer Catholic, said she still thought the Eucharist was a pretty good symbol of God's presence. O'Connor replied: "Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it."

For believing Catholics, the Eucharist is not a symbol; or rather, it's enormously more than a symbol. It's the literal, tangible, body and blood of Jesus Christ. And since the earliest days of the Christian community, honest believers have never wanted to, and never been allowed to, approach the Eucharist in a state of grave sin or scandal. St. Paul said that if we do that, we profane the body and

blood of Christ, and we eat and drink judgment upon ourselves (1 Cor. 11:27–32).

In other words, we commit a kind of blasphemy against God, and violence against our own integrity and the faith of other believers. There's nothing casual about this kind of sin, and the American notion of "civil rights" is useless and flatly wrong in trying to understand it. No one ever has a "right" to the Eucharist -- and the vanity or hurt feelings of an individual Catholic governor or senator or even a vice president do not take priority over the faith of the believing community.

Blasphemy and violence are unpleasant words in polite conversation – but for believers, they have substance. They also have implications beyond this lifetime. That's why no Catholic – from the simplest parishioner to the most important public leader – should approach Communion with grave sin on his soul. The media have no obligation to believe what the Church teaches. But they certainly do have the obligation to understand, respect and accurately recount how she understands herself – and especially how she teaches and why she teaches.

I want to end with two modest suggestions.

The first comes from Susan Sontag. In one of her last talks she said: "The writer's first job is not to have opinions but to tell the truth ... and [to] refuse to be an accomplice of lies and misinformation." That's a noble task for the journalist in the 21st century. And while I'm quoting non-believers who had no love for the Catholic Church, here's my second suggestion. It's from George Orwell: "Very few people, apart from Catholics themselves, seem to have grasped that the Church is to be taken seriously."

Most of you came here today because you already do try to take the Catholic Church and religious issues seriously, and you do try to write with depth, integrity and a sense of context. I thank you for that.

Now please tell your friends in the newsroom to do the same. I think history teaches us that the religious impulse is hardwired into human identity, and that faith is one of the engines of human dignity and progress. When religion gets pushed to a society's margins, politics takes its place with the same vestments, but less conscience.

We need the Church to remind us of the witness of history: that human beings remain fallible; that civil power unconstrained by a reverence for God -- or at least a healthy respect for the possibility of God -- sooner or later attacks the humanity it claims to serve; and that we're all of us subject to the same excuse-making and self-delusion in our personal lives, in our public actions -- and even in the corridors of national leadership.

Thanks for listening. I look forward to our discussion.