



**Preserving the Legal Protections of our Religious Liberties**  
*remarks offered during a Diocesan workshop for clergy and administrators*  
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*Memorial of Saint Clare*

In 1974 Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen spoke these prophetic words:

“The world in which we live is the battleground for the Church. I believe that we are now living at the end of Christendom. It is the end of Christendom, but not Christianity. What is Christendom? Christendom is the political, economic, moral, social, legal life of a nation as inspired by the gospel ethic. That is finished.

“Abortion, the breakdown of the family life, dishonesty, even the natural virtues upon which the supernatural virtues are based, are being discredited. Christianity is not at an end. But we are at the end of Christendom. And I believe the sooner we face up to this fact, the sooner we will be able to solve many of our problems.

“Thirty or forty years ago it was very easy to be a Christian. The very air we breathed was Christian. Bicycles could be left on front lawns; doors could be left unlocked. Suddenly, all this has changed; now we have to affirm our faith. We live in a world that challenges us. And many fall away.

“Dead bodies float downstream; it takes live bodies to resist the current. And this is our summons. We will have to begin a different church. We are for a moment on a trapeze. We are between the death of an old civilization and culture and the swing to the beginning of the new.

“These are the times in which we live. They are therefore wonderful days; marvelous. We should thank God that we live in times like this.”<sup>1</sup>

Spoken over 40 years ago this call is even more pronounced today. It is that reality of having to respond in direct and even courageous ways to what Pope Francis calls the “throw away culture” or what Pope Benedict labeled “the dictatorship of relativism.” That in part is why we are here today: especially in light of court decisions and government regulations being imposed that would have been laughed off in the years of Christendom are now gone.

We seek to do several things in these next few hours, although the task before us is greater than one sitting. We seek to identify and be reminded of the power and beauty of Church teachings, especially as they relate to the human person, creation and human sexuality which offer context. We seek to identify current issues that threaten religious liberty, freedom of

worship and freedom of conscience. And in a more practical way we seek to identify those situations where a clear policy or advice would be desired and helpful.

There are several basic principles that ought to guide us. First, in the modern vernacular, Catholic is more than a brand. To be Catholic and to declare our institutions Catholic has moral meaning. It stands for something greater than us or really for *someone* greater than us. When the word Catholic is attached others have expectations. To be Catholic is more than a marketing tool; it is a way toward salvation based on a way of life grounded on Gospel values; that way offers fulfillment and hope. It is a faith given by Jesus Christ through His Church, handed down over the years by those who went before and for which we are the current stewards and teachers. Therefore being Catholic ought not to be compromised or minimized because of secular pressures, atheistic ideologies or the misguided preferences of individuals.

The best of teachers are those who practice what they teach. How we respond to the challenges of our day teach our youth and can inspire or confuse not only the young but all on spiritual journeys.

Another principle is the truth that because something is declared legal under civil law does not make it right or moral. Abortion is the most apparent example. Assisted suicide is another growing menace in the same way. There are others.

A third principle is that we are to be true to what we believe but not impose it on others though we invite them to better understanding. In the same vein, others have no right to impose their beliefs on us. When they do we must resist and explain why – for the common good, for the education of children and for the salvation of souls.

The fact is that the Church and its institutions are subject to two sets of laws, civil law of the nation and states promulgated under the guidance of the political structure, and canon law, grounded in the natural law, promulgated under the guidance of the Holy Spirit by the Pope, the Vicar of Christ on earth, and interpreted by the Magisterium. As Catholics we seek to live as good citizens under the civil law but also as faithful Christians under Church law. Occasionally there are conflicts, especially in the areas of faith and morals. We recall the words of Jesus when queried about paying taxes, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and give to God what is God’s.”<sup>2</sup> What is especially God’s is our soul. We also recall the words of the martyred saint Thomas More who said, “I am the King’s good servant but God’s first.”<sup>3</sup>

There are certain practices that need to be clear as we navigate the challenging waters of our day. First we ought to identify well defined standards ahead of specific cases. They are to be true to Catholic teaching, be consistently applied, be fair and just, and be respectful of all persons.

What is our responsibility?

First we must inform our consciences about what the Church teaches and why. An informed conscience is not simply acknowledging what I would prefer to do or wish were the case, but what is the right thing to do based on the teachings of Christ and guided by the Spirit.

Secondly we must share these insights with staffs and constituents, always with respect but always with conviction.

Third we need to state clearly our religious purpose revealed with clarity in policy and mission statement, grounded in church authority. And finally when parish or institutional funds or use of facilities are offered, prudent judgment based on Catholic teachings is essential.

Today we will discuss some of the nitty-gritty immediately confronting us. Our focus is mainly on marriage and family life, employment and public accommodations. In the future there will be more, likely including the conditioning of accreditation and licensing requirements, expanding regulated conditions of employment, even direct religious discrimination, and sadly physical intrusions by secular ideologues which have already occurred around the country.

One I would like to briefly highlight is use of public funds. Over the years to better provide for our ministries seeking government funding has become a priority. As citizens we are deserving of such access. From what I know current programs like school lunch and special education are currently benign. However as increased conditions inconsistent with Catholic principles are included in grants and contracts in many fields we must be vigilant. We also must be on watch that we do not become so dependent upon or addicted to government dollars that the integrity of our programs is jeopardized. Thus we will need to increase our efforts to strengthen private funding and support.

Last week I attended the international convention of the Knights of Columbus. The KCs support our parishes and schools, priests and seminarians in so many ways for which we all are grateful. Occasionally the KCs give what is called the *Gaudium et Spes* award, Joy and Hope, to those who inspire others. It was awarded this year to the Little Sisters of the Poor, a religious order founded in France well over a hundred years ago to minister to the poor, a ministry which has expanded to the frail elderly and around the world. They have a substantial presence in our country. The Little Sisters of the Poor have received high visibility because they refused to give in to the government mandate to offer abortion-inducing drugs and contraceptives in their employee health plans. The penalty for not doing so would be millions of dollars in fines, threatening their very existence, destroying their Christ-like outreach to the poor and elderly. Yet such threats did not deter them. They sued the federal government on grounds of religious liberty and freedom of conscience. The legal challenge continues. I recall reading that they were merely pawns of political lawyers. But if you hear them speak you instinctively know that they are the real deal. They do not seek to impose their beliefs on others but they also have no intention of compromising those beliefs even at so great a risk. They are an inspiration and model for us all.

Also at that convention Cardinal Thomas Collins, Archbishop of Toronto, preached on the gospel reading of the apostles out on the lake caught in a storm at night. They were tossed about and filled with fear until Jesus walked toward them and calmed the storm, steadied the boat and called them to deeper faith and trust. The Cardinal said:

“Evil is real, but we face it with songs of praise. We are sent to sail the stormy sea, where we contend with forces that really are too great for our human strength, but where . . . we are able to recognize our vulnerability and need for God.

“The disciples obeyed the command of Jesus to set out across the sea, and they were in peril throughout the whole night, for he only came to them in the fourth watch, as dawn approached. We should remember this when we grow discouraged in the long

struggle against the reality of evil in this fallen world of ours. But Jesus sends us on the journey, and will not abandon us, as he did not abandon the disciples in the storm, his eye was upon them always, and it was through the storm that he came to them. And he does so for us.<sup>4</sup>

Soon-to-be-saint Blessed Mother Teresa once urged us in times of discouragement to “gaze at Jesus for he is always gazing at you.”<sup>5</sup> He is our anchor and our strength.

As we face the storms of our day, remembering that there have always been storms, let us do so true to the One from whom we get our name, Christian, disciples of Christ, whose eyes are always upon us. Let us do so with joy and hope, and even with praise, for the Lord has already from the cross and the empty tomb overcome the world.

As Archbishop Sheen noted: “These are the times in which we live. They are therefore wonderful days, marvelous. We should thank God that we live in times like this.” These are the days in which we have been summoned; let us accept the call with humility and courage, but especially with hope for our hope is in the name of the Lord.

May Blessed Mary our Mother and Saint Joseph our patron watch over and protect you, those you love and those you serve.

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1 – The Battleground of the Church, Most Reverend Fulton Sheen, 1974

2 – Matthew 22:21

3 – St. Thomas More

4 – Cardinal Thomas Collins, August 2, 2016, Supreme Convention of the Knights of Columbus, Toronto, ONT

5 – Bl. Mother Teresa of Calcutta