

‘CATHOLICS AT THE CAPITOL’

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Minneapolis/St. Paul, 2.19.19

Earlier this month, on February 8, the Tim Tebow Foundation sponsored an event called “A Night to Shine.” It involved 622 churches and 200,000 volunteers in 40 countries honoring 100,000 guests. All of the guests were persons with special needs. They came from every kind of background and age group. They had every kind of disability, from mild to severe. And all of them were surrounded for the entire evening with love. It’s a beautiful event, and Tim Tebow has been doing this for five years. In his devotion to these special human lives, Tebow uses his celebrity as an athlete to serve others. While he’s not a Catholic, he’s a committed Christian. And to those guests with special needs and their families, he’s also the truest kind of hero.

I mention this because a number of my friends have children with special needs. They’ve taught me quite a lot about love. None of them is melodramatic, or self-conscious, or even especially pious about their situation. They speak about their special child with an unsentimental realism. It’s a realism flowing out of love – *real* love, the kind that works its way through fear and suffering to a decision, finally, to surround the child with their hearts anyway, no matter what the cost, and to trust in the goodness of God.

Of course, that decision to trust demands not just real love, and not just real courage, but also *real faith*. We can’t trust a God we don’t believe in. Faith matters because hope and love can’t bear the weight of the suffering in the world without it. Faith matters because it reminds us that there’s good in the world, and meaning to every life; and that the things that make us human are worth fighting for. Faith matters *because it drives us to do what’s right*.

And that leads to four simple points I’d like to share.

Here’s my first point. We have -- and we need -- heroes for a reason. They remind us that we’re more than the sum of our failures and weaknesses. We remember people like Edith Stein and Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, because they devoted themselves to the good, the true, and the service of others. Their lives became a moral witness. The whole idea of “moral witness” comes from the assumption that good and evil are real, and that certain basic truths about humanity don’t change. These truths are knowable and worth defending. One of these truths is the notion of man’s special dignity as a creature of reason and will. We humans are part of nature, but we’re also distinct from it.

The philosopher Hans Jonas once said that three things have distinguished human life from all other animal experience since early prehistory: the tool, the image and the grave.¹ The tool imposes man’s knowledge and will onto nature. The image – man’s paintings and other art –

projects his imagination. It implies a sense of beauty and memory, and a desire to express them. But the greatest difference between humans and other animals is the grave. Only we humans bury our dead. Only we humans know our own mortality. And knowing that he will die, only man can ask where he came from, what his life means and what comes after it.

The grave then is an expression of reverence and hope. When Christians talk about “the dignity of the human person” and “the sanctity of human life,” we’re putting into words what all people instinctively know. Unique in nature, and unlike any other creature, something elevated and sacred in men and women demands our special respect. When we violate that human dignity, we do evil. When we serve it, we do good. And therein lies one of many modern ironies. We live in a society that speaks piously about protecting the environment and rescuing species on the brink of extinction. But then it licenses the killing of unborn children and the abuse of human fetal tissue as lab material.

This leads to my second point. As a people, we Americans are pragmatists. We put a high premium on material progress and practical results. Science and technology get those results – often very positive results -- and *because* they get results, they exert a heavy influence on law-making, public policy and the spirit of our culture.

But good ends – like eliminating birth defects -- can never justify wicked means, like killing infants and unborn children. Evil actions *always poison the good they’re intended to serve*. Knowledge and power without the virtues of wisdom, prudence, mercy and, above all, humility, to guide them are not just unhelpful. They’re dangerous. We’re never as smart as we think we are, and we humans have an unhappy track record when it comes to preventing the worst abuses of our own best intentions. In the end, trying to explain and serve the human person with thinking that excludes the reality of the spiritual, the dignity of the religious, and the possibility of God, attacks man himself. To put it another way, we can destroy what we mean by “humanity” while claiming, and even intending, to serve it.

This leads to my third point. The Founders of our country presumed the existence of natural law and natural rights. These rights are inalienable and guaranteed by a Creator; by “nature’s God,” to use the words of the Declaration of Independence. Such ideas are out of fashion in much of legal theory and social science today. But they’re very much alive in the way we actually reason and behave in our daily lives.

Most of us here today believe that we have basic rights that come with the special dignity of being human. These rights are inherent to human nature. They’re part of who we are. Nobody can take them away. But if there is no Creator, and nothing fundamental and distinct about human nature, and if “nature’s God” is squeezed out of the conversations we allow in the public square, then our rights become the product of social convention. And social conventions can change. So can the definition of who is and who isn’t “human.”

American public life needs a framework friendly to religious belief because it can’t support its moral claims about freedom and rights with rational and secular arguments alone. In fact, to the degree that it encourages a culture of unbelief, democracy undermines its own grounding. It causes its own decline by destroying the public square’s moral coherence.ⁱⁱ

That leads to my fourth and final point. In Catholic belief, *all human life*, no matter how wounded, flawed, young or old, is sacred because it comes from God. And we have an obligation to defend it. The dignity of a human life and its right to exist are guaranteed by God. Catholic teaching on abortion and sexuality is part of the same integral vision of the human person that fuels Catholic teaching on immigration, economic justice, racism, and the search for peace.

In the American tradition, people have a right to bring their beliefs to bear on every social, economic and political problem facing their community. For Catholics, that's not just a privilege. It's not just a right. It's a demand of the Gospel, and a practical application of Christian faith to the realities of daily life. We have a duty to treat other people with charity and justice, even when we disagree with them. But that can never be an excuse for our own silence on matters of importance.

Believers can't be silent in public life and faithful to Jesus Christ at the same time, any more than they can claim to be "Christian" and then kill – or quietly allow others to kill -- an unborn child with Down syndrome. Actively witnessing to our convictions and advancing what we believe about key moral issues in public life is not a form of coercion. It's honesty. It's an act of truth-telling. It's vital to the health of every democracy. And again, it's also a duty -- not only of our religious faith, but also of our citizenship.

We have a full agenda, so I'll close with just a few final thoughts.

Especially on a day like today, we need to remember that all law has moral content. It's an expression of what we "ought" to do – and not do. Therefore law teaches as well as regulates. Good laws can help to make a nation more human; more just; more noble; more compassionate. But ultimately even good laws are useless if they govern a people who, by their choices, make themselves callous, selfish, and shallow.

It's important for our own integrity and the integrity of our country to fight for our moral convictions in the public square. Anything less is a kind of cowardice. And it's even more important *to live what it means* to be genuinely human and "prolife" by our actions. That requires a life of fidelity to God, love for spouse and children; loyalty to friends; generosity to the poor; honesty and mercy in dealing with others; discipline and humility in demanding the most from ourselves.

We create a culture of life in the measure that we give our lives to others. That's what we really mean by heroism. That's what we love in our heroes. That's what a real hero is and does. The deepest kind of revolution never comes from violence. Even politics, as vital as it is, is a poor tool for changing human hearts. Nations change when people change. And people change through a witness of nobility, dedication, and love from other people -- people like each of you here in this room.

St. Augustine is one of my favorite saints, and he lived in a very difficult world much like our own; a time when a lot of things seemed to be falling apart. He was very aware of human

weakness and the power of evil because of his own sinful past. But he had no patience with despair. When his people would complain to him about the darkness of the times, he would remind them: *We are the times. We make them; we shape them.*

The lesson for us today is simply this: If we don't at least *try* to shape our times with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to do it with all our hearts and energy, then evil will shape the times, and ultimately shape us and those we love. That's why today matters. It matters because all of us are here today to live, to work, and to struggle together for the dignity of the human person -- *all* human persons, from the unborn child, to the poor, the weak, the immigrant, and the suffering.

This is why God made us: to be his witnesses that every life is precious; that there's good in the world, and it's worth fighting for with a clean heart and a right spirit. To borrow a thought from J.R.R. Tolkien, "I do not love the bright sword for its sharpness, nor the arrow for its swiftness, nor the warrior for his glory. *I love only that which they defend.*"ⁱⁱⁱ

Scripture tells us to choose life, and in being here today, that's the choice you've made. May God bless each of you and those you love. I'll pray for all of you -- and please remember those of us who are bishops in your own prayers, that God will help us to be the kind of pastors the Church needs.

ⁱ Hans Jonas, "Tool, Image and Grave: On What is Beyond the Animal in Man," 1985 essay

ⁱⁱ See Colgate University political scientist Robert P. Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy: God and Politics in the Fallen World*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2001

ⁱⁱⁱ From *The Two Towers*