

Mayflower Hotel, Washington, D.C.  
Friday, October 20, 2017  
4:00 p.m.

ORDER OF MALTA  
DEFENSE OF FAITH PRESENTATION

“THE FORMATION OF CONSCIENCE AND CULTURE:  
THE ROLE OF CLERGY AND LAITY”

It is a great pleasure for me to join all of the Knights and Dames of the Order of Malta here present for this Defense of the Faith program that was initiated in 2010 as a welcome addition to the Knights of Malta gathering for the investiture of the new members of the order. It was my privilege seven years ago to offer the first of these In Defense of Faith lectures and I am highly complimented to be invited back. I want to thank Knight Edward Damich, the Chairman of the Defense of Faith Committee.

I also want to recognize present Bishop Jean Laffitte, the Prelate of the Sovereign Order of Malta, Archbishop Leonard Blair, of Hartford and Bishop David Ricken, of Green Bay.

I also want to recognize the Knights of Justice, as well as the officers of the Federal Association, our President Margaret Melady, Chancellor Robert Hutton, Hospitaller Robert Signorelli, and Treasurer Peter Scudner.

Distinguished guests, those being invested into the Order of Malta, members of the Order of Malta, brothers and sisters in Christ:

Given that the overall theme of the program is Defense of Faith and some recent events touching on our faith, it seems all the more providential to have selected as the topic for my presentation, *The Formation of Conscience and Culture: The Distinctive Roles of Clergy and Laity*.

We in this archdiocese are feeling particularly grateful for a recent success in the struggle for the Defense of Faith. It was this time a week ago that a binding agreement was signed between the United States Department of Justice and Jones Day, the law firm representing this archdiocese and more than 70 other religious entities and dioceses across the country, that brought to a conclusion our litigation challenging the Health and Human Services mandate obliging our institutions to provide support for morally objectionable activities. This settlement brought a level of assurance as we move into the future.

Almost two weeks ago, the Trump Administration issued new proposed regulations to rescind the mandates which were previously issued under the “Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act” (“ACA”) which required religious organizations to provide in our health coverage plans contraceptive and other objectionable services.

While the regulations proposed two weeks ago provide much promise in the protection of First Amendment freedom of religious exercise, the resolution of the litigation that took place a week ago today adds another significant step in protecting our constitutional liberties.

You may recall that one reason we went into Federal court to challenge the HHS mandates was the fact that for the first time in U.S. history, regulations would have empowered the federal government to determine whether institutions that put our Catholic faith into practice – schools, hospitals, and social service organizations – were religious enough, or whether they could be forced to provide coverage for birth control, abortifacients, sterilization, and related-counseling services as part of health care coverage to their employees.

We argued that the practice of our faith was inextricably tied to the ministries that put that faith into action, and that – more fundamentally – the Bill of Rights enshrined freedom of religion as our nation's first and founding principle, and no individual or entity should be reduced to petitioning the government for rights that the Constitution already guarantees.

As part of our effort to speak up for the faith, to defend the faith, we have to reaffirm our own understanding about who we are as a nation, what we as Church bring to our societal efforts at a common good, and why each of us has a responsibility to carry out our role.

### What the Church Offers

A number of years ago I was invited to speak at the Catholic Center at Harvard University. The designated theme was “The Role of Faith in a Pluralistic Society.”

At the conclusion of my presentation, a man who self-identified as an atheist and who taught in the law school was the first to present a question. He asked, “What do you people think you bring to our society?”

The reference to “you people” was to the front row of the audience that was made up of representatives of a variety of religious traditions all of whom were in their appropriate identifiable robes.

Since he was a lawyer, I asked if he would mind if I answered his question with a question of my own. When he nodded in agreement, I asked: “What do you think the world would be like if it were not for the voices of all of those religious traditions represented in the hall? What would it be like if we did not hear voices in the midst of the community saying, you shall not kill, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness?”

What would our culture be like had we not heard religious imperatives such as love your neighbor as yourself, do unto others as you would have them do to you? How much more harsh would our land be if we did not grow up hearing, blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the peacemakers? What would the world be like had we never been reminded that someday we will have to answer to God for our actions?”

To his credit, the man who asked the question smiled broadly and said, “It would be a mess!”

The Church brings what it has always brought:

- 1) an invitation to faith
- 2) an encounter with Christ
- 3) a way of living based on the Gospel.

### The Challenge of Secular Culture

Yet the Christian way of life and the Gospel vision of right and wrong, virtue and God’s love all seem to be eclipsed by a strong secular voice. So pervasive is this “other message” that today many never even get to hear the truth, richness and joy of the authentic Gospel of Jesus.

The background or cultural context of our proclamation of the Gospel and Christian values includes what Pope Benedict XVI, during his 2008 visit to this country, described as “secularism, individualism and materialism.” At the basis of all of these is a destructive yet pervasive relativism.

It seems to me that we need to be aware of these obstacles and barriers as we try to live out our faith as members of the Church. While we seek to encounter the living Christ and draw closer to him, we recognize numerous challenges. Pope Benedict told us, “While it is true that this country is marked by a genuinely religious spirit, the subtle influence of secularism can nevertheless color the way people allow their faith to influence their behavior.”

We hear even more directly from Pope Francis in his challenge to us to renew in our hearts the joy of the Gospel in face of the culture around us. In his apostolic exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, he says, “The great danger in today’s world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God’s voice is no longer heard” (2).

Out of this has come a relativism that basically says there is no objective created order let alone a moral or natural law order. This we see clearly exhibited in the determination that sex and gender are not rooted in nature and biology but rather in one’s own will.

Cultural and societal changes have gone through a quantum leap in just 15 to 20 years. As an example we can look at the secular tsunami that washes away cultural landmarks such as marriage, family, common good, objective right and wrong. We are witnessing a process that will eventually profoundly impact our ability to carry out institutional ministry (e.g. Catholic elementary and secondary schools, Catholic hospitals and healthcare institutions, Catholic charities and Catholic social service ministries).

This process of social engineering includes:

1. Redefining constitutional religious liberty to mean freedom only to worship in the sanctuary of your choice, freedom of worship;
2. Codifying politically correct redefinitions of marriage, family, abortion, religious freedom and other issues in law. Legislatures at various levels now define as a fundamental human right access to government-funded procedures such as abortion, sterilization and surgical sexual realignment in every hospital (with no exception for Catholic or religious hospitals), obligatory insurance coverage of all of these procedures and, of course, the re-definition of marriage;
3. Determining legally that failure to recognize and support such newly defined human rights is a violation of the law. Such disregard for the law brings with it penalties and fines. For our schools, healthcare institutions and charitable operations, this will include decertification on the basis that such a particular operation is no longer in compliance with the law of the land.

This is not a scenario of things that might possibly happen. This is a depiction of what is already happening in our country. The appeal to the courts is now demonstrating the increasing vulnerability of our Catholic institutions and teaching as well as our basic religious liberty. The courts now regularly state the need to follow the prevailing political current as the norm for interpreting the meaning of constitutional freedoms.

In our litigation with the Secretary of Health and Human Services, circuit court after circuit court sided with the argument that the government's desire to provide free contraceptives now specified as basic health care takes precedent over religious freedom and the liberty to practice one's faith.

While the challenges we face may at times appear overwhelming, we must remember that we have been entrusted with the words of truth, the words of Everlasting Life. We need therefore to never lose hope, nor find that any situation is so daunting that we cannot confront it sometimes just by the courage to say what we believe.

We find our way of life in the teaching of Jesus. His words reach us in his Church. This explains our reliance on the Church to pass on to us the words of Jesus, the Gospel message, the Christian way of life. However, when we begin to talk about speaking up for the faith - of being a voice for our belief - we need to recognize the significant role of the laity.

#### Faithful Citizenship: Clergy and Laity

“Why doesn't the Church do something about this?” The woman who met me as I stood outside of church greeting people was waving a newspaper article that recounted some legislative body's recent approval of physician-assisted suicide. This was not the first time in more than 50 years as a priest and 30 as a bishop that I was confronted by men and women annoyed at what they perceived was the silence of “the Church.”

What they are all really asking is, “Why don’t bishops and priests do more politically?” Why are priests and bishops not more engaged in the political issues that result in the re-defining of our culture? Today those same questions might be directed to issues of family and marriage, religious freedom and immigration, human life and poverty and more.

The short answer is the Church should do more – that is, the Church understood as all of her members, with their different responsibilities and roles. If we want a society in which public policy defends the life and dignity of all, supports marriage and family, promotes the common good, recognizes objective right and wrong and religious freedom, personally and institutionally, then of course the Church must be involved. Especially, the lay faithful must speak out and become “salt and light” in our democracy.

The idea that somehow priests or bishops should be the primary ones addressing public issues and the framing of laws, and advocating for specific public policies, is too narrow a vision of the Church which would leave out about 99% of its members. Yes, bishops and priests have a very distinct and important role. They are the teachers of the faith, they pass on revelation and the received tradition, they call the baptized to live their faith every day. In fact, at the installation of every pastor, I ask him to renew his ordination promises, one of which says, “Are you resolved that in preaching the Gospel and teaching the Catholic faith you will worthily and wisely fulfill the ministry of God’s Word?”

This formulation of the renewal of priestly promises reflects Church teaching today as it has been so clearly spelled out since the time of the Second Vatican Council, more than 50 years ago. The Council saw the role of the laity to be the sanctification and transformation of the temporal order. In the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, this is made explicitly clear. The mission of the whole People of God ... is exercised when they work at the evangelization and sanctification of men; it is exercised too when they endeavor to have the Gospel spirit permeate and improve the temporal order (2).

The voice of the clergy, bishops, priests and deacons who preach, is to be the voice of faith and morals but not partisan politics and partisan political choices. I remind priests that when they get into the pulpit, seated before them are Republicans, Democrats, Independents, Greens, Socialists and some who feel no inclination to politics and to political preference at all. We who assume a role in the pulpit are to be mindful of that. People come to hear the Gospel and its implications and application today but not to listen to our partisan, political preferences with which they have every right to disagree.

You seated in the congregation represent legitimate, partisan, political positions. But the pulpit is the privileged place for the Gospel and the teaching of the Church that is applied to all of us. The temptation might be to short circuit this process and have clergy impose specific partisan political approaches or policies and even proclaim their preferences for candidates for public office. This practice is not new. I recall vividly the debate shortly after the Council over whether priests should run for political office. I thought it was a bad idea then as I still do now.

The appropriation by the bishop or priest of the lay persons’ essential role also implies that our laity might not be capable, even if properly informed, of carrying out their own unique responsibilities in the area of politics and public policy. Lay men and women are called to be “leaven” in our democracy and bring their faith and experience into the public square.

### Secularity and Secularism

The understanding of the distinctive role of the laity in the mission of the Church and in the transformation of the temporal order and its sanctification was developed further after the Second Vatican Council by Pope Saint John Paul II. A further distinguishing feature of the laity for Saint John Paul II is their secularity. “In this work of contributing to the human family, for which the whole Church is responsible, a particular place falls to the lay faithful, by reason of their ‘secular character,’ obliging them, in their proper and irreplaceable way, to work towards the Christian animation of the temporal order” (36).

It might be helpful to note the difference between “secular” and “secularism.” When using the term “secular,” the reference is made in contradistinction to “clerical,” or those in holy orders. There is a real and important place for the “secular” in determining public policy. It finds reflection in the separation of Church and state – the recognition of the domains of religious conviction and political persuasion.

“Secularism” is another term usually used to note a view of life that limits reality to what is verifiable in the temporal, material order. This worldview is opposed to those that recognize transcendent points of reference. Here today we find secularism claiming to have the sole role in the public square denying a place for values reflecting religious conviction.

Building on the work of his predecessor and the Council, Pope Benedict XVI would assert in his first encyclical that the creation of “a just society must be the achievement of politics, not of the Church” (*Deus Caritas Est*, No. 28). It is true that the Church seeks to inform the moral deliberation and political participation of her members as well as other believers or persons of good will with its public social teaching, but this is not intended to dictate outcomes in the political arena.

As Benedict XVI explains: “This is where Catholic social doctrine has its place: it has no intention of giving the Church power over the State. Even less is it an attempt to impose on those who do not share the faith ways of thinking and modes of conduct proper to faith. Its aim is simply to help purify reason and to contribute, here and now, to the acknowledgment and attainment of what is just” (*Deus Caritas Est*, No. 28).

In regard to the teaching role of the Church, Pope Francis writes in his first apostolic exhortation: “In her dialogue with the State and with society, the Church does not have solutions for every particular issue. Together with the various sectors of society, she supports those programs which best respond to the dignity of each person and the common good. In doing this, she proposes in a clear way the fundamental values of human life and convictions which can then find expression in political activity” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 241).

### Evangelizing Disciples

My brothers and sisters, if we are going to be evangelizing disciples, if we going to take on the task of sharing with others our faith, then we have to embrace what Pope Francis calls the commitment of the evangelizing disciple to go out, to encounter and to engage. Pope Francis

tells us to go out, encounter, engage and accompany people as you try to share with them the story and Gospel of Jesus.

To go out is to be able to leave our comfort zone and actually reach out to those who perhaps should be with us and are not and with whom we may have regular contact.

To encounter means to carry on our ordinary, daily life but this time aware that many of the people we meet, work and recreate with may really know very little of the values that we cherish – of the wonder of the Gospel message and of the joy that it brings.

That fact brings us to the action of engagement. We have to be open to initiating a conversation or responding in the midst of conversations that challenge the values that we hold dear. Sometimes this can take on the form of a simple “I have another take on that” comment when you hear people talking about life, actions, values, morality in a way that ignores Christ, his Gospel and our own appreciation of the Good News. Then it falls to us to be the witness and to have the courage to be able to say, “You know I see things a bit differently than that.”

### Characteristics

There are many characteristics of the evangelizing disciple, of the witness to the Gospel. I would like to cite five of them:

- (1) boldness or courage,
- (2) connectedness to the Church,
- (3) a sense of urgency,
- (4) compassion and
- (5) joy.

In the Acts of the Apostles, the word that describes the Apostles after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is “bold.” Peter boldly stands up and preaches the Good News of the Resurrection. Paul boldly announces the Word in frenetic movement around the world. Today, the New Evangelization must show a similar boldness born of confidence in Christ.

The new evangelizers also need a connectedness with the one Church, her one Gospel and her pastoral presence. The authentication of our message of everlasting life depends on our communion with the Church and solidarity with her pastors.

Another needed quality is a sense of urgency, as we see in Mary’s Visitation to Elizabeth. The Gospel recounts how Mary set off in haste on a long and difficult journey. There is no time to be lost because the mission is so important.

As we try to be inviting witnesses to the faith, we must do so with compassion. As the Lord looks loving and forgivingly on us, so must we turn our gaze to those we hope to bring closer to Christ.

Finally, when we look around and see the vast field waiting for us to sow seeds of new life, we must do so with joy. Our message should be one that inspires others to follow us along the path to the kingdom of God.

My brothers and sisters, what makes it possible for us to have confidence in our message and joy in proclaiming it is the recognition that what we are all about is the simple, yet powerful and life-giving proclamation, Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again.”

October 20, 2017