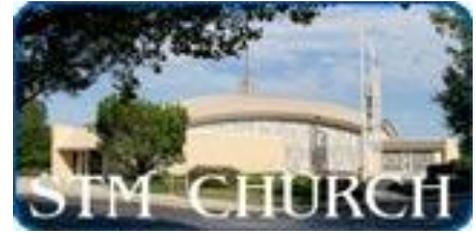




*St. Thomas More parish
Allentown, PA
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"Freedom at the Intersection of Faith & Politics"

When I received the invitation from Fr. Mathur to speak on "faith and politics," I recalled Bishop Barres quoting G.K. Chesterton, who wrote that "Thomas More is not quite so important [now] as he will be in about a hundred years' time." The bishop is fond of reminding us that that is just about now!

Of course, Chesterton and our Bishop were referring to the saint, but I think it's applicable to St. Thomas More parish, too, for now is an important, indeed critical, time both as Catholics and as U.S. Citizens. So I am grateful for this opportunity to speak with you about "Freedom at the Intersection of Faith & Politics." And those three terms make up the outline of my presentation.

1. POLITICS

The first thing to note is that, despite many opinions to the contrary, "politics" is not a curse word! Admittedly, I often characterize politics as "the ability to speak without saying anything." But it really is more than that, because all politics deals with an understanding of human life (both individually and collectively) and how to promote that understanding. So, simply put, let's define politics as "the art of governing people."

Now, since it is about "governing people," politics is about "us." And since it is also "for us" and "by us," then the "us" must be involved in politics! Notice, I say "must be" ... because to avoid or dismiss politics, even with a good intention, would be to abdicate our responsibility as citizens and even as Catholics. Why do I say "even as Catholics"? Because of that whole "love of neighbor" thing that I'm sure you've already heard about!

And the "art" to governing people is that of finding a way through the battles that are endemic to democracy. This is actually a good thing. As Archbishop Chaput describes it, politics is "where competing moral visions of a society meet and struggle." Notice, he says struggle, not fight, because the other in this political realm is not an enemy but our fellow citizens. With them the way we emerge together through the struggle that is the democratic process is by way debating our ideas and voting our convictions. And along that way is where "faith" enters the picture.

2. FAITH

Faith includes, but is more than, ideas. Faith inhabits the realm of belief. And the difference is that faith or belief has a dual grounding in both reason (what makes sense to us) and revelation (what is disclosed to us).

Let's consider the twin pillars that undergird faith and politics, namely, (1) the dignity of the person and (2) the common good.

By faith, we believe that every person shares equally in a dignity inherent in being human by virtue of having been created by God. In other words, faith holds out for us a very positive anthropology: what God created he saw (and still sees) as being "very good."

The secular variant on this – what we may simply call liberalism – also values the dignity of the person, but it does so in a conception of human beings that sees them as individuals with competing interests. This is the classical philosophy of Hobbes, who then envisioned the state (or government) as the power which would liberate individuals and enable them to pursue their own ends without fear of interference from other individuals.

"This modern theory" of government, says Lord Acton, has "swept away every authority except that of the State, and has made the sovereign power irresistible by multiplying those who share it." It "condemns as a State within the State every inner group and community, class or corporation, administering its own affairs; and, by proclaiming the abolition of privileges, it emancipates the subjects of every such (smaller group) authority in order to transfer them exclusively to its own." You can see this happening in expansion of large-scale government policies and programs.

As Patrick Deneen points out, "This picture of a radically individuated human being" could be seen at work during the recent Democratic National Convention where it was said that "government is the only thing we all belong to [*sic*]." That statement encapsulates Hobbes' outlook, which in turn leads to such things as the controversial HHS mandate. As Deneen puts it, this legislation implies that "Employees at Catholic (or other similarly informed religious institutions) are 'coerced' by not having free contraceptives provided as part of their health plans. The state, through the threat of punitive fines ... acts as the liberator of these oppressed people. This narrative seems plausible to many, because we have been deeply shaped and trained to associate the word 'liberty' with the freedom of individuals 'to pursue their own ends' ... and not the rights, privileges, immunities and liberties of groups, societies, associations, even a *corpus mysticum* like the Church. In such a view," Deneen concludes, "we find Leviathan run rampant."

And there's the risk, that government will run right over what we believe to be the second pillar of faith and politics, namely the common good, that which is of universal value and is true for all. This is the Catholic perspective on what politics is meant for, rather than the liberal one that sees it as protecting a majority of individual self-interests. The common good is about looking out for "us" and not just "me." (There's that pesky "neighbor" thing again!) This encompasses big social issues like defining a person or marriage or healthcare, but also others such as the economy,

foreign policy, education, human trafficking, and the like. Because of our belief in a common good, these social issues will always be important to faith and, conversely, religious viewpoints can and should inform public policy about these matters. Fortunately, we haven't time to discuss any of these issues in particular!

But to move beyond anthropological thought, Faith also demands personal action, good deeds borne from conviction and founded on Truth. And here's where being "Catholic" matters publicly ... or it should!

This active understanding is why the Year of Faith which we have just begun is so desperately needed. As the Holy Father explained in introducing this special year, Catholicism can no longer be assumed to exercise a direct influence on social life. And as Dr. Rodney Howsare commented during our opening Mass last week, there is no longer a Catholic country (not even Ireland), nor a Catholic culture (not even Italian), nor even a Catholic ghetto such as there was in the USA just a few decades ago (and, possibly, one in which many of you probably grew up).

But "Catholic" is not simply a demographic classification in a poll. It's not just about "membership" in some denomination. To be "Catholic" is to profess a certain faith; or, to put it in declarative terms familiar from a well-known political document, "Catholic" means "we hold these truths." As Archbishop Chaput writes in this regard, "Catholic is a word that has real meaning. We don't control or invent that meaning as individuals. We inherit it from the Gospel and the experience of the Church over the centuries. We can choose to be something else, but if we choose to call ourselves Catholic, then that word has consequences for what we believe and how we act. We can't truthfully claim to be Catholic and then act as though we're not."

Now, when it comes to what we believe and how we act, we enter into the realm of conscience. But conscience is not just an opinion, not merely a preference, not simply what I "like" – if it were, then everything would be good! Rather, conscience is the repository for Truth, that place within each of us where God's will meets our consciousness. And this is why a good conscience requires a proper formation. Or, to again use the words of Archbishop Chaput, "A healthy conscience is the voice of God's truth in our hearts, The way we get a healthy conscience is by submitting it and shaping it to God's will; and the way we find God's will is by conforming our lives to the counsel and guidance of the Church that Jesus left us. If we find ourselves disagreeing as Catholics with the teaching of the Church on a serious matter," says the archbishop, "it's probably not the Church that's wrong. The problem is much more likely with us."

Based on that proper formation of conscience, Faith calls each and every one of us to participate in public life, and the most basic way we do that is by voting. And this time around, that action is critical, because in the secular, liberal agenda that stands before us, what is at stake goes beyond the particular issues to encompass our very American way of life. In other words, the intersection of faith and politics in 2012 is a matter of freedom. And while that third and last term in our topic

may sound self-evident, nevertheless I fear that we don't fully appreciate what it means, especially when we speak of it as Religious Liberty.

3. FREEDOM

What, then, is religious liberty? Simply put, it is a liberty that is religious in character. That sounds redundant, but what I mean is this.

On the one hand, it has to do with what "religious" is. It is a freedom about religious things. Hence, it includes the freedom to BE religious (e.g., to believe, have faith, etc.) and also the freedom to DO religious things (e.g., worship, charitable works, etc.). This is the typical sense, one that is often intended by the term "freedom of religion."

On the other hand, it also has to do with what "liberty" is, for we believe that liberty, by its very nature, is religious. It's religious because our freedom comes from God (i.e., we're endowed with it; it's not "given" to us by the government) and because our freedom, ultimately, leads to God (in the sense of enjoying an eternal life that results from choosing God's will).

But there's more to religious liberty than the desire to be left alone to be/do our own religious things if we voluntarily choose to do so. For when it comes to "liberty," we must also distinguish between Free Will and Freedom. And to do this, I'd like to invoke one of the great American philosophers of all time. His team may be on the brink of elimination, but Yogi Berra still speaks ingeniously. Recall his famous dictum: "when you come to a fork in the road, take it!"

It may sound odd, but what Yogi speaks about is absolutely correct in terms of "free will," which is the faculty we have as humans, the ability we have to make choices. Indeed, at the fork in the road, you need to make a choice or you don't go anywhere! This free will is something we possess in virtue of being human; it's not something conceded to us, nor can it be taken from us.

But what Yogi failed to say, perhaps because it should be obvious, is that the choice of which road you take matters, because even when freely chosen, if you take the wrong road you end up being very lost. And this is what we mean by "freedom" (as distinct from "free will"). Freedom is the state or condition of being free. Yes, it's a starting point (because we have to be free in order to make any choices), but it is also, and perhaps more importantly, the result of the choices we make. In other words, it is by using our free will properly that we become free. Only by choosing the right road – the one that is true and good in terms of directions – will you get to where you want to go.

Thus, the root of the problem today is that we mistakenly conflate these two ideas, and even give preference to free will without regard for freedom. We think that as long as we can choose we are free, and, consequently, that politics is about ensuring we have all options to choose from, without limit. Our society equates freedom with having a choice, when freedom really means making a

choice, and making a good one. Otherwise, we remain stuck in the road and go nowhere. Or, to use a real example, consider convicts and addicts. They still have “free will.” But by virtue of their exercise of that faculty, they no longer have “freedom” – convicts are in jail, and addicts are chemically dependent. So, this is why Blessed John Paul was wont to say that “freedom is not free” ... because freedom also entails and necessarily depends upon what is true and good. If as a society we don’t choose what is true and good, then we don’t end up really being free. And that is why what we believe matters, and why the question of religious freedom is an issue for all people.

But today the freedom that lies at the intersection of faith and politics has become a rather dangerous one. The problems are many.

Religious liberty today is subject to increasing hostility. A survey recently released by the Liberty Institute and the Family Research Council reports “over 600 incidents of religious attacks and hostility in the United States – most of which occurred within the past ten years.”

We encounter this hostility in the public arena, with regard to exercising religion (i.e., praying) or displaying religion. This latter one used to be a civic issue – as in whether a municipality can put up a crèche at Christmas time, or whether a courthouse can have the Ten Commandments posted nearby. But the new thing nowadays is that even “personal” displays of religiousness are being challenged, as for example, in lawsuits about crucifixes in Italian schools, or Muslim dress in France, or a nurse in England who wore a crucifix as jewelry, and in government directives here in the U.S. about not being able to mention God at a military funeral or to put religious symbols on military graves.

We also encounter hostility to freedom in schoolhouses, with regard to sharing religion (as in children not being able to give Easter cards to classmates if they mention “Jesus”) or speaking about religion in public schools.

And we encounter hostility in churches/ministries, with government now attempting to regulate religious employment (which was the subject of the Hosanna-Tabor case recently before the Supreme Court) or even to discriminate against religion by way of zoning ordinances.

But beyond these and similar legal complaints, religious liberty is threatened by how our culture thinks.

On the one hand, we are faced with challenges to BEING religious, where religion is thought to be something merely private and not allowed into the public square, either as a basis for discussion and debate (e.g., in political discussions about moral issues) or as a way to inform/motivate action (e.g., as in social services). But we remain convinced, as Archbishop Chaput puts it, that “while religion is always personal, it is never private.”

On the other hand, we are faced with challenges to DOING religion, where religion is now thought to be limited to acts and places of worship or where religious works of charity are in danger of being put out of business. Now, some will say that if religious works accept government money, they have to accept government rules; that may be true, but government fines or penalties to religious works that choose to act according to what they believe is something that ultimately prohibits or prevents or eradicates that work. For example, the President of CUA estimates that our nation's Catholic university will be forced to pay \$62 million per year if the HHS mandate is not rescinded. That's why Cardinal George had the courage to announce that if the federal legislation isn't changed, the people of Chicago can say goodbye to four pages in the archdiocesan directory listing all the Catholic social services and agencies operating there!

Ultimately, the problem we face today in terms of religious liberty – with issues such as healthcare, same-sex marriage, and school choice on the front burners – is that the traffic light directing freedom at the intersection of faith and politics is what we cherish to be “the rule of law.” I say that is a problem for three reasons.

First, law is by definition based on some belief, on some sort of principle or ideal or concept acceptable to a majority. So, to exclude religious belief as providing a basis for legislation is to limit the very plurality which a democracy is supposed to uphold.

Second, law is by definition coercive; that is, it is a political tool to dictate action. So, a law violating beliefs or acts deemed to be religious has a controlling effect (a deleterious one, in this case) on the very place of religion in our land.

And third, law is, by intent and by effect, educational; that is, what we enshrine in the laws of this nation shapes the way our citizens think and thereby form the culture in which we all live. So, if laws are contrary to religion, that in itself “says” something to everyone about the value of religion (or lack thereof) in the life of our country.

And this is why our votes are so important, for we are the ones who elect those in public office who enact the laws by which we live together.

In conclusion, what can and should we do about freedom at the intersection of faith and politics? First and foremost, don't just stand there, or else you'll get run over!

First, we can and should Learn. The formation of our own consciences requires that we be educated in what is true and good if, in fact, we want truly to be free. If faith matters, if freely choosing to follow God's will is what we believe leads to a fulfilled life, then we've got to figure out or learn what God's will is. And that is why I encourage you to take advantage of every opportunity you have to educate yourselves during this Year of Faith.

Second, we can and should Act. We should do this in word, by speaking up when religious liberty is misrepresented. We should do this in deed, by voting in ways that protect and promote religious liberty. In other words, we need to do whatever it takes to bring back and keep religion in the public square. Otherwise, our American way of life, our freedom itself, is in jeopardy.

Finally, we can and should Pray. After all, it's the unique GPS system we have for getting us through the intersection of faith and politics! We should pray for the politicians whose job it is to safeguard our freedoms (including, first of all, our religious liberty). We should pray for church leaders, including our own bishop, who strive to speak out to us and for us on matters of religious liberty. And we should pray for ourselves and all our fellow citizens that we may realize and respond to what is at stake this November and in the years to come.

St. Thomas More, pray for us.

Thank you.

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