

# *Check Your Faith at the Door*

## *The Dilemma of the Catholic Citizen*

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*Abstract.* Since America was founded, faith informed its moral genius. From the Declaration of Independence to the work of Martin Luther King Jr., belief in God positively shaped the moral awareness of the nation. This article suggests that political discourse emerging in the middle of the twentieth century, which effectively prohibits the mention of faith in serious political conversation, is having devastating consequences on the moral capacity of contemporary society. It suggests that such faith-less political discourse contradicts America's founding logic. This article also reasserts the Catholic claim that truth can be known and that in the face of faith-less political discourse, Catholics are morally bound to seek complete truth, which requires faith. *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 10.4 (Winter 2010): 687–693.

How does a person of faith live in a pluralistic society? Our history can certainly provide some answers. George Washington, James Madison, Charles and Daniel Carroll of Maryland (Catholics), and other founding fathers helped bring about a free nation of free speech. They spoke of “truths” that were “self-evident” and that were given by the “Creator.” Such was how they exercised their “freedom of speech.”

One wonders what our founding fathers would make of public discourse today, or of our strictly secular public square. Would they accept the claim so prevalent

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today that one must talk about “a more perfect union” and “certain unalienable rights” without reference to the foundation of these rights? How did we get from speaking of God and his creation as a source of our national genius to not being able to speak about him at all in serious political discourse? How did it come about that when the bishops of Dallas and Fort Worth spoke about the “proper formation of conscience concerning voting as faithful Catholics” in 2008, they were excoriated and ridiculed in the media and even by many Catholics?<sup>1</sup>

### **The Ground of Moral Awareness**

Whatever can be said about these historical questions, I think we can safely say that since 1960, when then-presidential candidate John F. Kennedy spoke to a group of evangelical pastors in Houston, something has happened to public discourse in America. When Kennedy, in no uncertain terms, distanced himself from his Catholic faith saying, “I believe in a president whose religious views are his own private affair,” public discourse in our country changed in a radical way—and we have never been the same.<sup>2</sup> Since then, according to the nameless guardians of our society, legitimate public discourse has only been secular discourse, devoid of any reference to faith, the transcendent, or even truth. Any references to God or to Christ—deemed now to be at best private or sentimental bearers of personal meaning and at worst dangerous provocations to violence—are certainly out-of-bounds in this still relatively new form of public discourse.

But this never used to be the case. Once it was possible to talk about God and the common good. Once faith informed public discourse. But the forgetfulness that comes with the years, the struggle engendered by religious prejudice against Catholics, and pervasive moral relativism have taken their toll—and most citizens have not even noticed that public discourse was once different; that once, being a citizen did not entail completely marginalizing one’s faith.

Now it seems that we have lost the ground of our moral awareness and the genius behind so much of what has been great about our nation through the centuries. Consider Martin Luther King Jr. and his letter from a Birmingham jail in 1963: “I am in Birmingham because injustice is here,” he wrote with crisp moral clarity. Drawing on a moral foundation still then acceptable in public discourse, King was able to offer a potent and decisive criticism of the evils of institutional racism and oppression. “How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust?” he asked. To this question, King answered,

A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law, or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law

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<sup>1</sup>Bishop Kevin Farrell and Bishop Kevin Vann, Joint Statement to the Faithful of the Dioceses of Dallas and Fort Worth (October 8, 2008), available at <http://www.priestsforlife.org/magisterium/bishops/farrell-vann.htm>.

<sup>2</sup>John F. Kennedy, Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association (September 12, 1960).

that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust.<sup>3</sup>

Only by calling upon the deep moral traditions of our nation and upon his own Christian faith was King able to give voice to the struggle of the dispossessed and oppressed, the marginalized, and the victims of segregation and racism. And the question here is this: Without this foundation, what would he have said? How else would he have spoken with such moral power without the wisdom of “eternal and natural law”?

King’s letter from a Birmingham jail is one of the great moral treasures of our nation. Today, however, it would not even be considered serious public speech. Like the Declaration of Independence, this letter would be considered “inappropriately or superfluously religious”—or perhaps, if we were more polite, as simply “outdated” or “quaint”—because of its references to God and natural law. The demand today is to deconstruct these documents of our moral and national heritage. But can we do that? Can we remove the foundations of our moral heritage and still remain a moral nation? Can individuals disavow their moral knowledge in order to participate in the public square, and still be moral individuals?

### **A Convenient Little Box**

These issues confront us time and again. They affect the consciences of voters in every election cycle. They influence the decisions that we as a nation make about such fundamental issues as the right to kill human beings at the beginning of life by abortion, the right to kill persons near the end of life by euthanasia, and whether we ought to kill criminals at any point in between. These issues also call into question our freedom to pray in public, our approach to establishing ethical standards for scientific research, and our willingness to respect and protect the consciences of doctors and health care providers.

Most recently this tension between faith and public discourse has come to the fore again as we attempt to select new justices for the Supreme Court. We, as a nation, continue to struggle not only with questions about what influence faith should have on issues before the court, but also with more basic questions of judicial philosophy.

Let me suggest to you something that may sound rather radical: whatever policy differences there may be, most judicial philosophies of Democrats and Republicans or conservatives and liberals are, in my opinion, closer to each other than they are to a truly Catholic understanding.

They are closer to one another because, although one may be “fundamentalist” (e.g., the position of the strict constructionist) and the other may be, shall we say, “evolutionary” (e.g., the position of the social engineers), both are rooted in relativism. Both have bought into what Kennedy, in his fervor to be president, called the “absolute” separation of church and state.

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<sup>3</sup>Martin Luther King Jr., Letter from a Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963, King Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, [http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/annotated\\_letter\\_from\\_birmingham/](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/annotated_letter_from_birmingham/).

I admit that I am not a lawyer (only a new-born bishop), but we all can read the First Amendment. It simply states,

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

The thrust of the amendment, as I read it, is to give everyone the right to worship as they see fit and to protect religions from the intrusion of the state. Recalling the early, diverse religious history of the American colonies and the lessons learned from England and Europe serves to remind us of the particular context of this amendment. And in my nonexpert reading (but a citizen's reading nonetheless), the First Amendment does not seem to have been intended as a protection for the state against the influence of a person acting on a well-formed faith.

I submit that both the fundamentalist and the evolutionary approaches end up in relativism. One puts trust in a contingent and imperfect law, as though the Constitution and established precedent are the only grounds of truth. The other recognizes truth only in the prevailing mores and desires of society. The first approach leads to the rather strange notion that a good judge should have no moral convictions, or at least that he or she should leave them at the door of the courtroom. The second leads to a judge whose convictions are based *not* on such great moral imperatives as truth, justice, and equality, but on such principles as convenience, expediency, and the license to do what one wills—what is almost always, secretly, simply the will to power.

Basically, what we have done is put God in a convenient little box. We have reduced pluralism, which is based on a deep respect for one another in our common search for the truth, to a kind of absolute radical autonomy that despairs of the possibility of discovering the truth at all, or even doubts that there is such a thing. That is to say, we have traded healthy and civilized pluralism for a rather aggressive and violent relativism, and in rejecting the claim of shared human values (values eternally present within human nature itself), we have exalted the individual and self-will and neglected the common good.

As then-Cardinal Ratzinger (now our Holy Father) said before the papal conclave in 2005, “We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires.”<sup>4</sup> This is true: the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness bestowed on us by our Creator have been reduced to rights completely contingent on the will of those in power. The Holy Father was not exaggerating when he used the word “dictatorship.”

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<sup>4</sup>Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Homily of the Dean of the College of Cardinals (April 18, 2005).

## Truth Is Possible

So, given the philosophical and moral landscape of public discourse today, what would a truly Catholic approach look like? Perhaps I could describe the role of Catholic teaching and belief for the citizen or public servant by way of an analogy: Catholic teaching should be to the Catholic individual like night-vision binoculars to a soldier on reconnaissance. Without the binoculars, if a soldier has good eyes and gets close, he might be able to see what is taking place in the area of his surveillance. But the area will come into much clearer relief, and from an even greater distance, if he uses of his night-vision binoculars.

We in the Church have Scripture and two thousand years of thought to rely on in our continuing efforts to bring enduring principles to bear on the questions facing us today. We have the help of divine Revelation to bring into clearer focus what we might see only obscurely without it, and we know other truths that would be unknowable unless they were revealed. If you were a soldier and the lives of you and the people around you depended on your knowledge of the truth, could you, in good conscience, set the improved vision aside? Catholics believe truth is possible, that it is inscribed on every human heart and revealed in Jesus Christ. We must not neglect these truths—no matter what.

As the issues of abortion, euthanasia, and other related matters make clear, the questions we are dealing with are those of life and death and of basic justice. I might say they are even more than that: they are issues effecting the fundamental well-being and sustainability of our nation. These are issues that bring us to the deeper questions of democracy and what it means to be a republic—questions of truth, the foundation of law, and of what it means to be a human being. These are not merely quarrels of superficial value systems. Deeper things are at stake.

## Do Not Check Your Faith at the Door

We as Catholic Christians—not only bishops or priests or deacons, but all of us by virtue of our Baptism—have a responsibility to bring to the table what we have received. God has made his truth known, after all, not just for us but for the salvation of the world. The Church will not provide neatly packaged answers to every question we face. “She cannot and must not replace the State,” as the Holy Father said in his first encyclical.<sup>5</sup> That is not the Church’s job. “She does, however, have a mission of truth to accomplish, in every time and circumstance, for a society that is attuned to man, to his dignity, to his vocation.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, our task is to bring our faith to bear on the questions and problems of our neighborhoods, our cities and states, and our nation in such a way that we prove ourselves good citizens as well as faithful Catholics.

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<sup>5</sup>Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est* (December 25, 2005), n. 28.

<sup>6</sup>Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate* (June 29, 2009), n. 9.

Whenever human life and human dignity are threatened, we Catholics ought to say, “He is my brother!” or “She is my sister!” Without fear we ought to say, “This man has a right to our compassion and aid because he is made in the image of God and bears within himself an inviolable dignity—no matter his legal status!” Without fear, as Saint Gregory of Nazianzus said to his people centuries ago, we ought to stand up for “these, our brothers in God, whether you like it or not; whose share in nature is the same as ours; who are formed of the same clay from the time of our first creation, knit together . . . just as we are.”<sup>7</sup> Our faith informs the truths we all cherish as “self-evident,” so we should not be ashamed of it.

Faith informed the genius of our nation, and we should recognize that our basic belief in truth, in natural law, and in God do not threaten our good citizenship but enable it. That is, in living out our Catholic faith, we should bring to the public square our passion for service, for respect, for mercy, for patience, for forgiveness, for life—these timeless things that provide an invaluable compass. Because we are servants of truth, we are passionately concerned with the daily issues of humanity—with the ethical, political, and pastoral concerns of all people.

The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, says it best:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men.<sup>8</sup>

This beautiful statement on the Church continues:

The council brings to mankind light kindled from the Gospel, and puts at its disposal those saving resources which the Church herself, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, receives from her Founder. For the human person deserves to be preserved; human society deserves to be renewed. Hence the focal point of our total presentation will be man himself, whole and entire, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will.<sup>9</sup>

“Light kindled from the Gospel,” put to the service of our fellow citizens respectfully but also with conviction—this is our task: “love in *truth*,” as our Holy Father has recently reminded us.<sup>10</sup> We need not be afraid. We should speak of what we know and believe as Catholics. Of course, one could merely look with sympathy on those who never had the chance to receive what we have received, to know what we know, and leave them be. We could merely respect them with that secular sort of respect that fails to acknowledge the whole mystery of the human person. We could piously sit in our pews and righteously maintain our private faith while literally millions of

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<sup>7</sup>Martha Vinson, trans., *Fathers of the Church: Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, Select Orations* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 48.

<sup>8</sup>Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes* (December 7, 1965), n. 1.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, n. 3.

<sup>10</sup>Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, n. 1 and 9, emphasis added.

our fellow citizens are being victimized and slain right outside our doors in abortion centers and hospitals and in our prisons and on our streets. We could do that.

But we might have a problem as we hear in church those annoying passages from the Gospels like the stories of Lazarus and the Rich Man (Luke 16:19–31), the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), the Last Judgment from Matthew 25, and the like. The message of the Gospel is clear: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40).

As St. Paul makes clear, those who do not share our faith also have a responsibility to seek and discover the truth. And we, in turn, have a responsibility to witness to the truth and to be servants of the truth. Paul too had to live his Christian life and bear witness in a pluralist society—in Corinth, a city of “many ‘gods,’ and many ‘lords’” (1 Cor. 8:5).

He bore witness and so must we. What excuse do we have when we are given knowledge of the truth and fail to share it, or opportunities to lead and fail to do what we know to be right and good? None! When you enter the public forum, do not check your faith at the door.