

Center for Faith and Culture  
University of Saint Thomas  
Wednesday, October 20, 2010  
7:30 p.m.

RELIGIOUS FAITH'S ROLE  
IN  
BUILDING A GOOD AND JUST SOCIETY

Inaugural Lecture  
for the  
Master of Arts in Faith and Culture Program

by

Cardinal-designate Donald W. Wuerl  
Archbishop of Washington

It is a privilege and joy to join you for this inaugural lecture at the establishment of a new Master's Degree in Faith and Culture as part of the Center for Faith and Culture at the University of Saint Thomas. I am particularly grateful for the invitation of Father Donald Nesti, CSSp, the Director of the Center, and a longtime friend with whom I had the privilege of working many years ago when he was President of Duquesne University.

I also want to acknowledge your Archbishop, His Eminence Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, also a longstanding friend going back to our days as priests together in the Diocese of Pittsburgh. In saluting Cardinal DiNardo, I also want to thank him for his leadership in this important local Church and on the national level.

I also want to recognize Dr. Robert Ivany, President of the University of Saint Thomas, and express my real appreciation for all that he does on behalf of this outstanding university.

I have been asked to address the topic that is at the very heart of the Center for Faith and Culture and the reason why there is a new Master's Degree in Faith and Culture. I welcome the opportunity to discuss with you the longstanding role of faith in our American culture and the particular gift that religious faith brings to the effort to build a good and just society. This topic is all the more appropriate for a Catholic university because this institution participates in the challenging task of helping its students answer the great questions of human life, including "How shall I live?"

This campus is a home of learning, a place where intellectual development occurs and academic excellence provides a gauge against which to measure personal achievement. We are all aware that we live in a highly scientific-, technological- and information-oriented world. Life at a university is an invitation to learn and appropriate so much of the information and data available to us.

But there is more. We need to know as well what to do with all of our scientific and technological information. We need to make judgments about how we use what we know. There is a great distinction between knowledge, information, the accumulation of data, and wisdom.

In one of the many dramatizations of the life of Henry VIII there is a scene where Saint Thomas More is being led from the room where he has just been sentenced to the Tower. On the way, he meets his successor in office as Chancellor of the Realm who obtained the position by helping the king achieve the objective he desired — a divorce. More says to Cromwell, “You have made a dreadful mistake”, to which Cromwell replies, “I have made a mistake? You’re the one on the way to prison and I am Chancellor.” More replies, “Your task as advisor to the king is to tell him not what he can do, that he already knows. Your task is to tell him what he ought to do.”

In the world in which we live, science, technology, human capability and, therefore, political opportunities and new avenues of government intervention and direction in our lives, are moving at such a rapid pace that they run the risk of outstripping the ever-important ethical and moral reflection that should accompany them. Too often, what results is what can be done rather than what ought to be done.

But as soon as we enter into the world of “ought,” we enter the realm of moral and ethical reflection. A critical factor in this process is the norm against which we measure our scientific and technological capabilities when making judgments. It is at this point that we encounter the impact of culture and the importance of the cumulative human wisdom passed on in our Christian culture. At this point, we recognize how well served we are by the received Tradition that anchors us in our faith.

As Pope John Paul II said in his apostolic constitution, *Ex corde ecclesiae*, “A Catholic university’s privileged task is ‘to unite existentially by intellectual effort two orders of reality that too frequently tend to be placed in opposition as though they were antithetical: the search for truth, and the certainty of already knowing the font of truth’” (1).

In his address to Catholic educators in April 2008, Pope Benedict XVI, at The Catholic University of America, noted that “all the Church’s activities stem from her awareness that she is the bearer of a message which has its origin in God himself: in his goodness and wisdom, God chose to reveal himself and to make known the hidden purpose of his will (cf. Eph 1:9; *Dei verbum*, 2). God’s desire to make himself known, and the innate desire of all human beings to know the truth, provide the context for the human inquiry into the meaning of life. This unique encounter is sustained within our Christian community: the one who seeks the truth becomes the one who lives by faith (cf. *Fides et ratio*, 31).”

Culture is the cradle of our history, our story, our identity, and it necessarily includes our religious experience, our faith life. As we begin to examine how we are to respond to the issues of our day, we need to reflect on the context and home of our self-identification — our culture.

We meet today in an archdiocese that can trace its roots all the way back to the appointment of a Vicar Apostolic of Texas in 1842, but long prior to that, the faith was lived thanks to the intrepid efforts of the early missionaries to Texas.

I exercise my pastoral responsibilities as shepherd of the flock in the Archdiocese of Washington, which contains within its boundaries Saint Mary's County, the location of the first Catholic colony in the English-speaking world. Maryland was the first to provide statutory guarantee of personal and institutional religious freedom. These elements of our local experiences are fortuitous reminders of the place of religious faith in our nation's history.

As you know, there is a statue in the United States Capitol building representative of the history of each state. When I served in the western state of Washington, I was always very proud of the fact that the one statue allotted us was Mother Joseph, a sister of Charity of Providence, who was considered one of the pioneers in the formation of the early life of that state by her work as a religious and by the impact of her life on the state. The state of Hawaii is represented by the recently canonized Saint of the Lepers — Damien de Veuster.

Representing California under the dome of the Capitol is the statue of Junipero Serra. It is hard to imagine another person who has left such an impact on any state in the union as has this quiet, modest, faith-filled Franciscan whose footsteps left in their wake what are now communities along most of the coast of California.

The church buildings, temples and synagogues that dot the landscape of our nation do more than simply remind us of our faith history. They also proclaim how deeply embedded religious faith is in our culture and in our vision of human dignity, moral imperative and the purpose of life.

The recently concluded PBS series *God in America*, while woefully limited as it seriously understates the role of the Catholic Church in our nation, nonetheless points out the impact of religious faith on our United States culture.

With religious faith comes also a way of living, a set of standards for moral and civil behavior and those expectations of conduct that are threads, to this day, woven into the fabric of our societal life. "You shall not kill" is not simply a legal convention of any particular political tendency, but rather a moral imperative rooted in our human nature, proclaimed by our religious heritage and intrinsic to our identity as a people.

As we reflect on the place of religion in our country's history, I want to recognize the wide breadth of religious traditions from which Americans today draw inspiration. The great diversity of religious experience only enhances our nation and its collective effort expressed in public policy. While noting this rich tradition, I intend to focus on the Catholic Church and its impact as one, but nonetheless a marked, expression of the role of religion in a pluralistic society.

Recently in the question-and-answer portion of a presentation on a similar theme that I gave at a secular university, a member of the faculty asked in a somewhat direct manner, "What do you people (meaning religious community leaders) think you bring to our world?" I asked if he would mind if I answered his question with another question. He nodded in agreement, and I proceeded to ask what he thought the world would be like, but more particularly what he thought our country would be like, if it were not the heir to the millennia of religious instruction and inspiration found in the Decalogue, the Beatitudes, the parable of the final judgment in terms of

our care for one another or Jesus' message that we love one another. To his credit, my inquisitor responded with a smile "It would be a mess!"

Bidding the Pope farewell at Birmingham's airport as he concluded his trip to Scotland and England, Prime Minister David Cameron said that the Pope's message of the importance of faith in molding the moral character of a nation had resonated far beyond Britain's minority Catholic population.

"You have spoken to a nation of six million Catholics, but you have been heard by a nation of more than 60 million citizens and by many millions all around the world," he said. "You have really challenged the whole country to sit up and think and that can only be a good thing."

The Pope reminded his listeners that the very identity of Britain is found in its Christian faith. The same can be said of us and our American cultural identity. Looking back over our history, the threads of religious experience are woven throughout the fabric of our national identity.

In looking at the place of religion in our country's history, we turn to at least three important areas of consideration. First we need to consider the long-standing recognition of the manner in which the voice of faith serves and continues to function as the conscience of society. This action is seen, in particular, in the influence of the Church's social justice teaching on the social legislation of our nation.

The impact of well-articulated, faith-based principles have most evidently helped to form public policy in the United States in the areas of human dignity and the improvement of working conditions that were a routine part of the American scene at the time of our grandparents and even parents. The Church brought to the debate the strongest moral voice, even when it was not always welcome. Most of the social legislation of the 1930's and 40's found its moral foundation and philosophical formulation in the Magisterium of the Church.

Today our struggle is to achieve the same success echoing Pope John Paul II's encyclical, *Evangelium vitae* (*The Gospel of Life*), and its defense of all human life from conception to natural death. Our founding fathers wrote of the inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, rights so endowed by God, our Creator.

Secondly, we must note the all too familiar current secular drive to subordinate religious faith to secular principles and to bleach out religion and religious influence from contemporary society. This movement claims to be the only legitimate player on the field of our nation's response to the multiple and grave challenges of our day.

In third place, we look for the way forward as we consider how do we both assess and assert the role of faith in our contemporary American society, recognizing the integral contribution of faith, religion and Church to our American culture.

In addressing religious faith's role in building a good and just society, we should be all the more conscious of our rootedness because we cannot become isolated from our connectedness and expect to flourish. As a people we have a need to be a part of a living unity

with roots and a lived experience with a history and, therefore, a future. Our lives as individuals and as a society are diminished to the extent that we allow ourselves to be cut off or disconnected from that which identifies and nurtures us.

## RELIGIOUS FAITH: THE CONSCIENCE OF SOCIETY

I want to turn our attention to the manner in which religious faith has served and continues to serve as the conscience of society.

In 1620, before they left the deck of that small ship that brought the pilgrims to the coast of New England and ventured ashore, the earliest English-speaking European colonists reached an agreement known historically as the Mayflower Compact, and thus determined that they would recognize two principles by which their freedom would be guided: the law of God and the common good. Those intrepid men and women, after a long and cold sea journey to our shores, did not rush immediately to land. They paused. They waited. They prayed. Before they set foot on land they acknowledged the One who would guide their steps. Their acknowledgement was not mere ceremony: it was both precedent and pattern for our style of life in the New World.

“In the name of God Amen” they began this first written articulation of a political philosophy in the English colonies that has served as an impetus for the American political experience for almost four hundred years. At the heart of this formula is the understanding that God and God’s law — however it is known — is normative for human action and that, in the application of that basic belief into positive civil law, the common good would also exercise a normative function.

The vision and generosity of spirit of the first Catholic colonists who arrived in Maryland in 1634 anticipated our Declaration of Independence. They established a civil government based on religious freedom and on God’s law as a norm for a new society in which all would be free and each person’s worth would be valued.

Last fall, I had the pleasure of participating in a ceremony in historic Old Saint Mary’s City in southern Maryland for the “unlocking” of the first Catholic Church in the English Colonies in what is now the United States. In 1704, in an effort to impose silence on the Catholic Church, the new government in Maryland revoked the statute providing religious liberty and ordered the church locked so that it could never again serve as a place of Catholic worship. You can imagine my delight when I joined the current sheriff of Saint Mary’s County, arguably the successor to the sheriff who was ordered to lock the chapel, as he inserted a replica of the original key in the restored chapel’s door, and both of us pushed open the door. I could not help but remind the large crowd of participants in this event that it is easy to lock doors and we must always be pushing open doors to allow the free exchange of ideas and the place of religious faith within our nation.

The service which faith renders as the conscience of American society is a cornerstone of the American experience. It finds expression in our deep-seated conviction that we have inalienable rights from “the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God.”

A profound part of the human experience is the search for truth and connectedness, and the development of human wisdom that includes the recognition of God, an appreciation of

religious experience in human history and life, and the special truth that is divinely revealed religious truth.

Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, offers us guidance when we deal with the relationship of faith and public life. However, to understand his most recent encyclical we have to go back to his first letter to the Church, *God Is Love*. Here he tells us: “The two spheres (Church and state) are distinct, yet always interrelated (28).”

The separation of Church and state, as it has been long understood in our country, does not mean separation of faith and moral values from the public square and the formulation of public policy. The Pope goes on to tell us that the separation of Church and state opens the space necessary for both Church and state to influence and form culture. Politics, law and faith are mingled because believers are also citizens. Both Church and state are home for the same people.

The Church does not pursue her mission or function by becoming involved in civil governance or by taking sides in partisan politics. Rather, the function of faith is one of persuasion. The Church teaches and teaches and continues to teach.

We stand with many of our brothers and sisters of a wide range of religious traditions in recognizing the existence of God, God’s providential plan at work in the world and the wisdom of God’s law written in our hearts.

Without an objective norm against which the actions of all people can be held to account, we are left with only external norms. In a democracy, this becomes the majority vote and in other societies, it is resolved by force — giving rise, once again, to the ancient dictum “might makes right.”

It was precisely out of an understanding that there is an intrinsic moral norm that at the end of the Second World War, the Nuremberg Trials made an appeal not to the fact that the allies had won the war, but that there are such things as crimes against humanity.

Cardinal Ratzinger, in his essay *Conscience and Truth*, points out that something is missing in the perceived opposition between external authority and subjective conviction — and it is truth. As we have already said, were there not a truth that can be attained outside the self, the world would degenerate into opposing camps of self-interest with an uneasy social peace being achieved only when various interest groups found sufficient common self-interest to bind themselves together and impose their will on others. Regrettably this is a virtual description of the current state of communal and political life in the United States.

As Christians, we also recognize another overriding principle — the love of God. God is love, God shares with us the gift of love and God asks us to return that gift, including the way in which we respond to one another.

Religious faith has long held a seat at the table of those institutions and realities which form culture. Religious faith reminds society of the criteria of civilization, of what it means to be human and to act in accord with humanity. The principle of the distinction of Church and state is not threatened by the voice of faith. In fact, it is strengthened.

The recent film, “Nine Days That Changed the World,” describing the first visit of Pope John Paul II to Poland, presents vividly an account of how the historic nine-day pilgrimage in June of 1979 created a revolution of conscience that transformed Poland and fundamentally reshaped the spiritual and political landscape of the 20th century.

In spite of a decades-long effort on the part of the Communist Party to bleach out of the memory of Poles their history, faith and culture, the arrival of the Church’s first Polish pope reawakened the soul of a nation. Millions of Poles, almost one third of the nation, turned out to see the Holy Father in person, while the rest of the country followed his pilgrimage on television and radio. Within 16 months, Solidarity became the first officially recognized free trade union in the totalitarian Communist Bloc, with over 10 million members. The momentum of this nine-day visit would eventually lead to the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

This Center for Faith and Culture addresses the defining issues of our day out of the realization of who we are as a people with a history, a story and a future. This enterprise recognizes that no one person, no part of our society, no people can become isolated, cut off from its history, from its defining experiences of life, from its highest aspirations, from the lessons of faith and the inspiration of religion — from the very "soil" that sustains life — and still expect to grow and flourish. Faith convictions, moral values and defining religious experiences of life sustain the vitality of the whole society. We never stand alone, disconnected, uprooted, at least not for long without withering.

#### THE CURRENT SECULAR DRIVE TO BLEACH OUT RELIGION

As we continue, I want to turn our attention to the current secular drive to abstract religious influence from contemporary society. Every culture in human history that has endured has recognized as innate to the human experience the need for a transcendent authority to sanction ultimately right from wrong. The secular model alone is not sufficient to sustain a true reflection on who we are as a people and how we recognize right from wrong.

Today, however, we live in a moment of time when we witness a movement in some opinion forums away from the appreciation of the basic religious values that underpin our culture, our society and our laws. In place of the religious values accepted and expressed by a great variety of faith communities, we face today the assertion of the need to substitute a so-called solely secular frame of reference within which public policy should be articulated. It is as if we were somehow to paint over all of the markers of our history and erase the recognition of all of our roots and all of our grounding and start over — this time without God.

For example, until very recently in our public civil life, mention of God was taken for granted and prayer inspired by belief in God was a routine part of government-sponsored programs and activities. The prayer was expected to be generic enough so as not to exclude the denominational sensitivities of the vast majority of those present. Hence, one did not use a formula of prayer that clearly spoke to only one religious tradition.

Times have changed.

Nine years ago, shortly after 9/11, a memorial service was held in Shanksville, Pennsylvania for the families of the heroic passengers on the United Airlines Flight 93. The priest, rabbi and ministers were exhorted by a government official not to mention God lest they embroil everyone in a “Church-state problem.”

The young priest, whom I know, began his remarks by saying: “Two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ came among us to tell us how we deal with such a tragedy and how we can begin to make sense of it.” One by one, the other religious leaders that followed also spoke from their faith perspective to the mourners who had gathered precisely out of their own religious convictions and in appreciation of religious faith that provides the context to begin to deal with such horror and evil.

In recent years we have witnessed a movement, expressed by some public opinion voices, away from an appreciation of the basic religious values that underpin our laws — religious values accepted and expressed by a great variety of faith communities. In their place we are told to substitute a so-called secular frame of reference within which public policy should be articulated.

More recently — in fact earlier this month — protestors greeted members of the Supreme Court and executive branch of government as they arrived for the Archdiocese of Washington’s annual Red Mass. In a new take on the separation of church and state, the demonstrators asserted that people in public life should not attend a religious service lest their presence imply government endorsement of prayer. Absurd? Yes, and yet it still made the news.

In his trip to our country two years ago, Pope Benedict XVI responded to a question about whether the United States’ historic appreciation of the role of religious belief in ensuring a sound democratic order would be a plausible model for a secularized Europe. Referencing our political and religious experience, he said that “this situation of a state deliberately and decidedly secular (was) precisely through a religious will in order to give authenticity to religion. And we know that in studying America, Alexis de Tocqueville noticed that secular institutions live with a de facto moral consensus that exists among the citizens.”

In other words, the separation of Church and state was precisely to allow for the flourishing of faith that in turn would impact on the state specifically because religious faith and political preference are the expressions of the same individual person. We must assume the influence of religion on the actions of the state because the same person who is a citizen is also a believing member of a faith community.

The assumption of the new “secular” model of society as the only acceptable way of addressing public policy, colors much of our media presentation and sets the tone for the discussion of most issues of true significance. Precisely because of this, I submit that we need to look again at the place of faith and religious values in our efforts to build the common good.

## REASSERTING OUR IDENTITY IN OUR CULTURE

Increasingly, there is a realization in our country that secular humanism alone is not able to provide the moral guidance and frame of reference we as a society so desperately need. As we look around us for a moral and rational frame of reference within which to make significant

judgments, we find that it is precisely our religious cultural heritage, our faith experience, that offers us enduring answers.

The then-Cardinal Josef Ratzinger recognized the danger inherent in a society that would lose its connectedness to the principles underlying its very identity. He addressed the issue at the Mass preceding the conclave that elected him Pope: “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.”

Pope Benedict XVI recently returned to this theme in his September 16 talk in Glasgow, Scotland where he noted: “The evangelization of culture is all the more important in our times, when ‘a dictatorship of relativism’ threatens to obscure the unchanging truth about man’s nature, his destiny and his ultimate good.”

Personally, I remain optimistic. Here each of us plays a part in the effort to balance what I suggest is truly out of kilter. This is done in our own personal, serene but firm affirmation that God is a part of our life, public and private. When enough people say what they believe, eventually it will be heard.

## FAITH IMPACTING CULTURE

If we have learned anything in our review of the history of western civilization and particularly our own unique United States expression of American culture, it is the understanding that the thread of religious faith is woven throughout the fabric of our nation.

We are called today to do our part — to take our turn — to be faithful to the perennial call to share the faith, to live the faith and to have it woven in to the fabric of our cultural experience today.

Our Holy Father’s call for a New Evangelization, a reproposing to this age and culture the perennial wisdom and truth of the Church’s received Tradition, involves a wide-ranging effort recognizing that we are all disciples of the Lord who are called to share the vision.

My hope is that all of us will see the New Evangelization as a lens through which we see everything we are doing, but now in the light of our understanding of how important it is for each of us to tell the story, share the excitement and be that leaven where the faith has gone flat and that salt where the faith has lost its zest.

The New Evangelization can be the outlook that impels all of us to discover fresh resources, to open original avenues and to summon new strength to advance the good news of the Lord.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I want to note that the same faith in God that marked our nation’s beginnings continues to thrive, to inspire, to form, and to give identity to who we are today. Since we are both members of the Church and citizens of the state, we expect that our faith be reflected in our public life. We exercise our responsibilities in prayer for our nation, its leaders,

its government and its people and, at the same time, we work hard so that Gospel values can enrich our public policy.

A contribution of the Center for Faith and Culture and its newly inaugurated Master of Arts program is precisely to lift up in our American democratic society our history and the role religious faith has had in molding it, lest we ever become disconnected in this frenetic, contemporary society from our roots that are sunk deep into the rich soil of our national identity, spiritual experience and faith convictions.

This Center for Faith and Culture is a great gift to our society and can be a significant voice in ongoing national debates. What you bring is the reasoned voice of historical experience, confirming that religious faith, as a foundational part of our national experience, must continue to nurture and sustain our society so that by its own very connectedness to its roots it can blossom and flourish.

Rooted in faith and aware of God's providential care, we pray with confidence and hope that God will bless our nation. This we do because we are a people of faith and, therefore, a people of prayer. In our fervent and sincere prayer, all of us recognize our relationship to God and God's care for us individually and collectively. This is the reason we can pray, "God bless America."

Thank you.