

**Address on Conscience and the Catholic Layman**  
**Boston Catholic Men's Conference**  
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Gentlemen, it is an honor for me to join you this afternoon, as you ponder the question of how we, as Catholic men, are called to live our lives as “Workers in Christ’s Vineyard.” Inasmuch as I have the privilege of serving as head of the world’s largest organization of Catholic laymen, I’ve had occasion to think about this subject quite a lot.

Some of you are undoubtedly brother Knights, and so you know that we’re celebrating our 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. Since our founding down in New Haven, Connecticut in 1882, we’ve provided an opportunity for millions of Catholic men to live out their faith together, bound by devotion to the principles of charity, unity, fraternity and patriotism. We’ve faced many difficult challenges over the years, and have met them together, as Catholic gentlemen who strive to be loving husbands and fathers, and as men whose Catholic faith is much more than a perfunctory visit at Mass on Sunday.

It has never been an easy thing to live one’s life as a faithful Catholic. We all know that in the earliest days of the Church, Christians frequently paid with their lives for simply worshiping the one true God. Martyrdom was the price of faith, and many willingly paid the price.

We tend not to think too much these days about martyrdom. The days of Nero and spectacles in the Roman Coliseum are long gone, but martyrdom is not. Sister Leonella, the Catholic nun who spent her life helping the sick in Africa, was murdered by an Islamic extremist in Somalia last September. According to the Cardinal Kung Foundation, every one of the approximately 45 bishops of the unofficial Roman Catholic Church in China is either in jail, under house arrest, under strict surveillance, or in hiding. Bishops in their 70s and 80s have died in prison after years of detention.

And we all know the sacrifices in Poland by the members of Solidarity just 20 years ago.

How fortunate we are to live in a country where religious freedom is among our most basic rights, enshrined in the Constitution in the first amendment of the Bill of Rights.

But even in America, we have had to fight to make sure that the words of the First Amendment really matter. In 1854, right here in Massachusetts, the virulently anti-Catholic Know-Nothing Party won the governorship and almost every seat in the state legislature. One of their first orders of business was a proposal to ban Catholics from holding public office. They failed, but the anti-Catholic prejudice they spread persisted in one form or another for another century. A son of Massachusetts and a brother Knight, John Kennedy, finally erased the last barrier to full Catholic participation in American society in 1960, when he won the highest office in the land. And as JFK moved into the White House, another Massachusetts Catholic and brother Knight, John McCormack, overcame one more barrier when he became the first Catholic speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives.

One important lesson to learn from our long fight to overcome prejudice is that no statement of high ideals, such as our Bill of Rights or Declaration of Independence, is the end of

the matter. To use a term sometimes used by lawyers, they are not “self-enforcing.” Just *saying* something does not *make* it so.

In the 1920s, a resurgent Ku Klux Klan, which hated Catholics as well as blacks and Jews, managed to persuade legislators in Oregon, of all places, that Catholic parochial schools should be shut down. Ignoring the First Amendment’s guarantee of free exercise of religion, Oregon adopted a law requiring all students to attend *public* schools, effectively ending Catholic education there.

The First Amendment is not self-enforcing. And so the Knights of Columbus joined with the sisters who operated one of those schools to challenge the Oregon law, and took it all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. We won. Today your children have an unquestioned right to attend Catholic schools because we did not stand by idly when that right was under attack.

On July 4, 1776 America’s founders declared that “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are *Life*, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” The Fourteenth Amendment states clearly that “No State shall . . . deprive any person of *life*, liberty, or property, without due process of law.” But the “self-evident” right to life was no longer self-evident to seven members of the United States Supreme Court who legalized abortion in 1973. And thanks to them, more than 40 million unborn children have been deprived of their lives without due process of law during the past 35 years. The constitution is not self-enforcing, and the ideals of the Declaration of Independence have meaning only as long as we insist that they be honored. Thousands of Knights of Columbus, and I’m sure many of you, have marched each year on the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, to protest the injustice of denying unborn children the protection of law, and to give public witness to our belief in the sanctity of human life.

I don’t have to tell you that it can be difficult today to defend the right to life and the institution of marriage – in short, to stand with the church and the Vicar of Christ. The pressure to go the other way can be intense. Some elected officials who were once pro-life, including some Catholics, have given in and switched sides.

In some cases, switching from being pro-life to pro-choice may have been simply a cynical political calculation. But in most cases, people seem to have persuaded themselves that it is reasonable to believe that a radical notion of a “right to privacy” is more precious than the right of an unborn child to live. Despite the clear and unequivocal teaching of the church to the contrary, they appeal to a right of **conscience** in rejecting our Catholic tradition in defense of life.

I spoke a little earlier about the years in which Catholics in America had to overcome prejudice. And overcome it we did. But we can look back now, 47 years after the inauguration of John Kennedy, and realize that 1960 was not a year in which our challenges as American Catholics ended. They simply changed. Today, the role to be played by the individual **conscience** is at the center of these challenges.

We rightly place a very high value on the right of conscience.

Next year, we will mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations just a few short years after the end of World War II. After all of the terrible bloodshed of that war, there was a determination throughout the world to put human freedom and the dignity of the human person at the center of the rule of law.

When Pope John Paul II addressed the UN General Assembly in New York in 1995, he called the Universal Declaration of Human Rights “one of the highest expressions of the human **conscience** of our time.”

Article 18 of the Declaration is of particular interest. It reads as follows:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, **conscience** and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

It can't be any clearer than that. Freedom of conscience ranks right up there with freedom of speech and freedom of religion as fundamental values. The Pope himself says the Declaration is “one of the highest expressions of the human conscience.” Does all this mean that pro-abortion Catholics are right? Does it mean that their position is fully protected by an absolute right to act according to one's conscience?

Well, to quote the title of a recently published book by a good Catholic friend of mine, they have “the right to be wrong.” We all have the option of saying “no” to the Gospel of Life. God gives us free will. He respects our choices. But no one should be under any illusion that rejecting such a fundamental moral law—in this case that it is wrong to intentionally kill an innocent human being—does not bring with it any consequences.

The right of conscience is not simply a matter of sincere belief or firm conviction. If that were true, then Hitler and his gang of murderers could argue their way into heaven with the claim that they thought what they were doing was right. If that were true, then heaven could be full of such evil men, since the poet reminds us, “the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, drawing on two important documents of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* and *Dignitatis Humanae*, says that “man has the right to act in conscience,” but it adds some critical detail. “Conscience must be *informed* and moral judgment *enlightened*,” it points out. And “in the formation of conscience, the Word of God is the light for our path.”

Non-believers will come to judgments of conscience in some other way, but for those of us who take the Catholic faith seriously, a well-formed conscience is crucial. That is something we have to work at. It doesn't just happen. In fact, the catechism points out that “it can happen that moral conscience remains in ignorance and makes erroneous judgments about acts to be performed or already committed.”

And when someone “takes little trouble to find out what is true and good, or when conscience is by degrees almost blinded through the habit of committing sin,” then “the person is culpable for the evil he commits.” In other words, not bothering to try to separate right from wrong is no excuse. Neither is self-delusion.

None of you here today falls into that category. You are here because you want to be a better Catholic man. You know how tough the pressure can be in today's society to conform to a secular way of doing things. There may be penalties to pay. I have the privilege of working every day at an organization where I am surrounded by men who share our faith and a desire to live out that faith. But you may face a difficult situation in your workplace: perhaps your faith makes you somehow suspect. Perhaps your very employment is threatened by it.

In any case, it is unlikely that you'll ever find yourself in the position of Saint Thomas More, the patron saint of lawyers. As an attorney myself, I can tell you that if any group needs a really good patron saint, it's the lawyers! More, a faithful Catholic and Chancellor of England under Henry VIII, was ordered to take an oath stipulating that in matters of faith, the King had supremacy over the Pope, and he refused. He resigned his post, and quietly retired to the countryside, saying nothing for or against the King. But his silence spoke volumes, and Henry

would not tolerate it. In a farcical trial, on the basis of false evidence, he was convicted of treason.

As he sat in the Tower of London awaiting execution, More wrote a meditation on the subject of martyrdom, *De Tristitia Christi*. In it, Christ encounters a martyr to whom he says:

“You are afraid, you are sad, you are stricken with weariness and dread of the torment with which you have been cruelly threatened. Trust me. I conquered the world, and yet I suffered immeasurably more from fear. I was sadder, more afflicted with weariness, more horrified at the prospect of such cruel suffering drawing eagerly nearer and nearer. Let the brave man have his high-spirited martyrs, let him rejoice in imitating of them. But you, my timorous and feeble little sheep, be content to have me alone as your Shepard, follow my leadership; if you do not trust yourself, place your trust in me. See, I am walking ahead of you along this fearful road.”

In this Lenten season, we focus on the Christ who was betrayed, unjustly condemned and brutally tortured before giving his life for us. This is the same Christ who goes before every martyr on “this fearful road.” We may suffer because we follow him, but he will be our strength, if we let him, because he has united himself to our own suffering.

In *Evangelium Vitae*, John Paul II offered a similar vision of the struggle that every Catholic faces in an increasingly hostile culture:

Faced with the countless grave threats to life present in the modern world, one could feel overwhelmed by sheer powerlessness: good can never be powerful enough to triumph over evil! At such times the People of God, and this includes every true believer, is called to profess with humility and courage faith in Jesus Christ, ‘the Word of Life.’ The *Gospel of Life* is not simply a reflection, however new and profound, on human life. Nor is it merely a commandment aimed at raising awareness and bringing about significant changes in society. Still less is it an illusory promise of a better future. The *Gospel of Life* is something concrete and personal, for it consists in the proclamation of the very person of Jesus.”

John Paul made a point of saying that it is up to each of us to make a deliberate, conscious decision to “choose Christ.” I believe that your presence here today means that you are making that choice. And once the choice is made, living according to one’s conscience means to “seriously seek what is right and good and discern the will of God.” It does *not* mean looking for “loopholes.”

As Catholics, you and I do not choose Christ in a vacuum. We choose Christ in a community that has a tradition and a history and a memory. We choose Christ as he presents himself to us, he is the Bridegroom who loves his Bride the Church, who has given his life for her and who guides and protects her still today. We choose Christ who has given us a pope to protect that tradition, that history and that memory. And in choosing Christ in this way we defend this tradition, we contribute to this history and we preserve this memory.

Catholics are not as aware these days of the natural law tradition as we used to be. *Gaudiam et Spes* puts it this way: “man has in his heart a law inscribed by God.” It is a voice that calls us “to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil.”

Natural law, in turn, is the foundation for the absolute necessity of respecting individual conscience. In *Dignitatus Humanae*, the Second Vatican Council was very clear: Man “must not be forced to act contrary to his conscience. Nor must he be prevented from acting according to his conscience, especially on religious matters.”

Gentlemen, this is precisely the area where we face our greatest challenges today, because attacks on the right of religious conscience are the most serious threat to religious freedom in America in 2007.

Here in Massachusetts, the Catholic Church faced an impossible choice this time last year: **comply** with a state law requiring Catholic Charities to place adoptive children with homosexual couples or **violate** the law by following Catholic teaching and insisting on its right of conscience. Violate the law, or violate your conscience. The only way out was to stop handling adoptions altogether.

In January, British Prime Minister Tony Blair announced that there will be no exemption in that country for Catholic adoption agencies, and they will face the same impossible choice as Massachusetts Catholic Charities.

In the health care field, the abortion lobby has waged a nationwide assault on rights of conscience of doctors, nurses and pharmacists.

In Illinois, despite that state's Health Care Right of Conscience Act, the governor issued an "emergency rule" requiring all pharmacists to dispense abortifacient drugs regardless of their religions or moral convictions.

Just two days ago, the governor of Colorado signed a bill requiring Catholic hospitals to dispense abortifacient drugs.

In Connecticut, the legislature is now considering a similar bill, which would force our state's four Catholic hospitals to dispense abortifacient drugs.

In July 2002 the 11 public hospitals in New York City imposed mandatory abortion training for all medical residents. But some 25 percent (or 38 of the approximately 150 doctors in residency training) have opted out of the abortion program, although doing so could compromise their medical careers.

The list of states where this sort of assault on religious conscience is going on is simply too long to recite here.

Even in states where some conscience protection is provided, it often comes with a caveat that forces a health care worker to recommend a provider of an immoral service or drug, making them complicit in the immoral behavior.

While there is piecemeal protection for doctors in the United States with regard to performing abortions, there is no universal standard.

The long and the short of it is that current legal protection for rights of conscience is inadequate. There is a real need for a universal legal right of conscience.

The Chicago-based Americans United for Life has proposed a model "Health Care Rights of Conscience Act" that would protect the fundamental right of conscience in law for both individuals and institutions.

The Act would implement the principles embodied in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This model statute should be adopted in every state.

I suppose all of us have a favorite work of American art. Perhaps many would choose a painting by Winslow Homer or a sculpture by Frederick Remington.

And whenever I am in Massachusetts, I think of my favorite, John Trumbull's painting of the Battle of Bunker Hill.

If one did not know the history of the battle it would be impossible to say which side won by simply looking at the painting.

The Americans, now without ammunition, defend the body of their fallen leader, Joseph Warren, with an expression as resolute and determined as that of any Englishman.

In painting the faces of the men standing under liberty's flag, Trumbull captured as never before the strength of the American character.

We have seen that character many times since—on the faces of the Irish Brigade at the Battle of Fredericksburg, the Marines at Iwo Jima, and most recently the police and firefighters on September 11.

We can see it reflected even in the name of the Knights of Columbus. As we know, it was first proposed that the new association organized in the basement of St. Mary's Church in New Haven be known as the Sons of Columbus.

Instead, the incorporators chose the name Knights of Columbus, because for them the word "knight" represented the virtues they hoped to promote.

These men sought to confront the anti-Catholicism and bigotry that were a daily part of their lives. Some of them had fought in the terrible Civil War. All of them knew its history.

They admired great generals such as Grant, Hancock and Sheridan and they knew others who displayed something less than greatness: a hesitant McClellan, an over-confident Hooker, and an incompetent Burnside.

And they knew, too, of the courage and loyalty of those men crossing the bridge at Antietam Creek, climbing Marye's Heights at Fredericksburg, and holding Cemetery Ridge at Gettysburg.

What distinguished these men on the battlefield were courage, discipline and loyalty. It was these virtues that the incorporators of our order hoped to foster by choosing the name "knights."

They knew that the medieval code of honor by which the knight lived rested on the personal virtue of courage, discipline and loyalty. Without these, the knight's pledge of fealty to his prince was worthless.

When the tide of battle turned or the prince was wounded, the mercenary and the conscript might leave the field to the enemy. But not the knights. They could be relied upon to stand firm.

Their loyalty was such that Shakespeare would have Henry V say to them: "We band of brothers."

I need not tell you that today on this field, in this state, our Church faces a great challenge—a challenge to protect the lives of innocent children and the institution of marriage. As Catholic laymen—as fathers and husbands—we have been entrusted with this duty. With all due respect, this is not a duty only of priests and bishops. And if Catholic husbands and fathers do not step forward to meet this challenge, then who do we expect will do so?

We may run from the challenge, but we may not run from the responsibility.

It is reported that as British General Gage was planning his assault on Bunker Hill, he looked over at William Prescott and the Americans under his command who were preparing their fortifications, and he asked an aide whether they would put up much of a fight.

He was told the following: "I cannot answer for his men," said the aide, "but William Prescott will fight you to the gates of hell."

Not every challenge demands this type of determination. But some do. Defense of life is one. Defense of a right to conscience is another. And defense of marriage is a third.

Though few people know the story today, in August 1926, the Mexican government began a systematic persecution of the Catholic Church there. The United States government decided to do nothing, viewing the persecution in Mexico as that country's domestic issue. That

could have been the end of it as far as the United States was concerned, but a determined group of men stepped up and spoke out.

Within days of the beginning of the persecution, the Knights of Columbus passed a resolution decrying the Mexican government's actions and calling for the raising of a \$1 million fund to be used to help those displaced by the persecution. The money would also be used to bring the story of Mexican government's brutal suppression of the Church to the American public in an effort to prod the U.S. government into action. The next month, then-Supreme Knight James Flaherty met with President Coolidge to urge him personally to take action.

The Ku Klux Klan actively opposed the Knights, and offered to raise ten times the amount the Knights of Columbus had promised to raise, but the Klan would give their money to the Mexican Government for "stamping out papism." It was no idle threat. The Klan numbered 4 million men in the 1920s, and 40,000 of its hooded members marched in Washington during that decade. But Knights, and our allies in the Catholic press, especially at *America* magazine, remained undeterred.

The pressure brought by Catholics of conscience on behalf of their brethren south of the border worked. The United States government took a second look at the Mexican situation and began to bring quiet pressure on the government there to come up with a solution. Within three years an accord was reached ending the worst of the persecution.

Today, the United States government speaks out on religious freedom issues regularly. It maintains a religious freedom office at the State Department. But it was a determined group of Catholic laymen who first were able to get the United States government to look outside its borders on the issue of religious freedom.

In the 1950s it was the Knights of Columbus who led the United States to add the words "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance, and who continue to protect those words as defendants in the latest lawsuit seeking to remove them.

We live out our faith in other very important ways as well: last year, Knights donated more than \$139 million and 64 million hours of service to charity. We must not shirk from the issues of the day—abortion, marriage, the dignity of every person—but we must not get so caught up in the political elements of these issues that we substitute politics for practice or lobbying for love. We must strive to be in the whole sense a people of life and a people for life working together to build a culture of life.

Today, we support legislation that establishes conscience protections for people who will not compromise their beliefs. We have been outspoken in defense of the right to life and marriage.

If the laity must be the frontline of the Church in the world, we must also be the greatest defenders of marriage – since most of us are called to that vocation.

The family is, in the words of the *Compendium*, "the vital cell of society." In fact, it was the protection of the family that motivated Father Michael McGivney to bring his parishioners together to form the Knights of Columbus. The issues facing families then were different. Fathers might be denied jobs because of their Irish ethnicity or Catholic faith, families might be ripped apart, not by divorce but by bankruptcy if the breadwinner died in the all too common factory accidents of the day.

Today the family is under pressure in other ways. Divorce is common, even among Catholics. You and I have a responsibility to build marriages that last, and to raise children who understand and appreciate our faith. And in doing that, we should teach our children both by word and by example.

It was the example of the early Christian martyrs – many of whom were laymen – that was the catalyst for the first great surge in those of our faith. It was the humility of Juan Diego, a layman, whose example and willingness to be the messenger of the Virgin of Guadalupe changed the course of the Western Hemisphere bringing millions into the faith.

My point here is that all of us can do something important and together we can do something great.

Just this week, Pope Benedict XIV released what is known as an “Apostolic Exhortation” entitled “Sacramentum Caritatis,” or sacrament of love. It is about the Eucharist, where “holiness has always found its centre.” He asks the “lay faithful, and families in particular, to find ever anew in the sacrament of Christ’s love the energy needed to make their lives an authentic sign of the presence of the risen Lord.”

“The eucharistic sacrifice,” he says, “nourishes and increases within us all that we have received at Baptism, with its call to holiness, and this must be clearly evident from the way individual Christians live their lives.”

And finally, “Worship pleasing to God can never be a purely private matter, without consequences for our relationships with others: it demands a public witness to our faith.”

Gentlemen, that’s the message for today and every day: Eucharistic holiness; devotion to family; public witness. A love for one another that mirrors Christ’s love for us. A love for Christ that unites our conscience with his.

To those of you already active in providing a good example in your communities individually or through organizations such as the Knights of Columbus, I commend you for the work you are doing. For those of you considering new ways of putting your faith into action, I encourage you to do so. I am proud to call you brother Catholics and I would welcome you as brother Knights.

Thank you very much!

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