

A Community of Conscience

How appropriate that every year our Maryland Catholic Conference holds its annual Catholic Lobby Night on Presidents' Day. For it is the very religious liberty secured for every American citizen by our nation's Founding Fathers that paves the way for hundreds of Maryland Catholics to come to Annapolis every year to share with their elected officials the teachings and concerns of the Church.

President James Madison, often referred to as the Father of our Constitution, wrote that "the religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate. This right is in its nature an unalienable right." President Madison went on to say that conscience is "the most sacred of all property" and considered it "the particular glory of this country, to have secured the rights of conscience which in other nations are least understood or most strangely violated."

And our first president, George Washington, defended the need for conscience protections, saying "the conscientious scruples of all men should be treated with great delicacy and tenderness: and it is my wish and desire, that the laws may always be extensively accommodated to them, as a due regard for the protection and essential interests of the nation may justify and permit."

Our early leaders were visionary in understanding the role of religion in the public square and in foreseeing the many challenges to the rights of people of faith to exercise their religious freedom. On many occasions, we hear from people that there is no place for religion in affairs of the state. However, we believe there is to be no separation between one's faith and life in either public or private realms. All Catholics are instructed to act on their beliefs with a well-formed conscience based on sacred Scripture and the Church's teaching magisterium.

Those in government leadership who claim they can't impose their private beliefs on their public duties as lawmakers are sadly mistaken about the basic moral principles upon which all laws are based. The value of human life and the institution of marriage transcend foolish claims about the separation of church and state, and should never be forsaken in favor of party politics or personal political gain. Those elected officials who have had the courage to stand by their convictions on these issues are to be commended. We pray that the consequences of losing sight of these basic values will weigh heavily enough on the conscience of other elected officials that they will someday find their way back to these basic truths about life and the human family.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops says Catholics are called to "Be a community of conscience within society. By their voice and their vote, they should contribute to society's welfare and test its public life by the standards of right reason and Gospel truth. Responsible citizenship is a virtue (and) participation in the political process is a moral obligation."

Hundreds of Catholics, including several priests and deacons, answered this urgent call earlier this month by coming to Annapolis to share with legislators the truth of our Church's teaching on such issues as abortion, the death penalty, marriage and immigration. I am especially grateful to Father Martin Burnham, Father Patrick Carrion, Monsignor Richard Cramblitt, Father Jack Kingsbury, Father James Sorra, Father Stephen Hook and Father Robert Wojtek (oops, I hope I haven't forgotten anybody!) for their attendance with the people of their parishes, and to those pastors unable to attend but who mobilized their parishioners in great number. Monsignor Joe Luca's parish of St. Louis in Clarksville, Howard County, had a tremendous showing of approximately 60 people! I also extend my gratitude to Mary Ellen Russell, executive director of our Maryland Catholic Conference, for organizing this important event and for her and her team's tireless efforts to make sure the voice of

the Church and of all Catholics is heard by our elected officials at the state level.

While we may gather as a family of faith only one day each year to participate in a political process that respects the role of religion in public life, our Church has a daily and consistent presence at that local, state and national level to ensure the Gospel truths are ever-present in the public debate surrounding every important issue.

Meanwhile, we have an ongoing responsibility to inform our own consciences so that current and future generations of faithful Catholics can exercise the religious liberties earned for them by their forebears, and continue carrying the Gospel truths to the public square.