

# Fortnight for Freedom Homily

## **I. Faith Enriches Public Life**

Sargent Shriver was a great American; he was also a great Catholic. A daily communicant and an advocate for the sanctity of human life at all its stages, Sargent Shriver understood how faith, worship, and service are linked. They were certainly linked in his long life of service to our country, whether it was launching the Peace Corps during the Kennedy Administration, or Head Start, Vista, and the Job Corps during the Johnson Administration, or, later in his life, serving as Chair of the Special Olympics. He was a living example of how faith enriches public life. And there are countless others. Many people of faith enrich public life as private employers who organize their businesses according to Christian principles and strive to live up to those principles in how they conduct their companies. To echo Pope Francis, they seek to be full time, not part time Christians. Their faith too enriches public life.

What we see in the life of Sargent Shriver is writ large in the Church's daily life. Almost everywhere in the country Catholic Charities is the largest non-governmental provider of social services. Last year Catholic Charities in the United States served 10 million persons. Our country is also blessed by a network of wonderful Catholic hospitals that served well over 5.5 million patients in 2012 with a record 101 million outpatient visits, while providing billions of dollars of uncompensated charitable care. In almost every area of the country, Catholic schools educate more children than any other non-governmental system. Last year approximately 2 million students were educated in Catholic schools, among them young people from America's most disadvantaged neighborhoods, and more than 940,000 students were enrolled in Catholic colleges and universities. Yes, faith enriches public life, in the sheer magnitude of the services it provides.

## **II. Not Two Wings**

None of this happens by accident. None of it is a sideline. The Church does not have two wings: a "faith and worship" division on the one hand, and a "service" division on the other. Quite the contrary. We cannot claim to love God without loving our neighbor. What we believe and how we worship give rise to a life of service. Pope

Benedict told us that the Church's deepest nature is expressed in three ways: proclaiming the Word of God; celebrating the sacraments; exercising the ministry of charity, including our charitable institutions & programs. My old boss and mentor, James Cardinal Hickey, was once asked why the Church educated so many non-Catholic inner-city students. His answer was simple: we don't do it because *they're* Catholic but because *we* are.

This doesn't mean we Catholics claim to be better than others.

It only represents a sincere effort to bear witness to the Gospel through the example of dedicated men and women of faith and through Catholic institutions of service, healthcare, and education, institutions that are shaped by compassion and moral values that flow from the teachings that we profess in faith. Happily the same can also be said of other churches and denominations. Faith enriches public life not only by the magnitude of its services but by the qualities of mind and heart, by the values and virtues, it brings to the task.

Educating the young, healing the sick, serving the poor and vulnerable: ... these activities are part of our baptismal DNA as Catholic Christians. No wonder we shudder, no wonder we react so strongly, when governmental authority slices and dices our Church ... by separating in law and policy our houses of worship from our charitable, healthcare, and educational institutions ... on the score that the latter are somehow less religious than our churches.

And let's be clear. The efforts of the government to divide the Church into a worship wing and a service wing do not spring from a theoretical interest in how churches are organized. It is part of a broader movement to limit religious freedom to freedom of worship - to accord a fuller degree of religious liberty to houses of worship but a lesser degree of religious freedom to charities, hospitals, and universities. If left unchecked, this tendency will continue to diminish the influence of religion in helping to shape the character of our country, not only by our words but above all by the way we conduct our ministries of service. In the case of the now infamous Health and Human Services mandate, only parishes and institutions mainly dedicated to sharing the faith are fully exempt from having to include in their employee health care plans medications and procedures that are contrary to the Church's teaching.

Catholic charities, hospitals, and universities are not exempt but accommodated, but we believe that the so-called accommodation is inadequate and will end up implicating our service institutions in providing coverage for medications and procedures contrary to the Faith: ... like abortion-inducing drugs, sterilization, and reproductive counseling at odds with the Church's teaching that extends even to underage family members of Church employees. Faith and worship inspire and sustain the service the Church offers, yet the government is insinuating a contrary Gospel in the Church's daily life.

### **III. Guarantees, Not Lip Service**

Not long ago, Pope Francis spoke out in defense of religious freedom. Echoing today's reading from the Book of Genesis which proclaims that each person is created in God's image, Pope Francis called upon the nations of the world to uphold "the intangible dignity of the human person against every attack." He spoke of how church and state should each do their part to promote "the interests of the people and society." Yet he also declared that, "religious freedom is more often talked about than achieved" and told us that "it's the duty of everyone to defend religious freedom & to promote it for all people."

We may be tempted to think that the Pope was talking to other people in other parts of the world - but he was talking to us too. In tonight's Gospel Jesus teaches us the distinction between what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God (cf. Mt. 22:21). This distinction rings true in our hearts as believers and as American citizens, for we recognize the wisdom of separating Church and State. For as Pope Benedict taught so wisely, "The State may not impose religion but must guarantee religious freedom & harmony between the followers of different religions." And he added, "For her part, the Church, as the social expression of the Christian faith, has a proper independence and is structured on the basis of her faith as a community which the State must recognize. The two spheres are distinct, yet always interrelated" (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 28). Yet our government is taking from what belongs to God by state-sponsored attempts to force the Church to compromise her own teachings as the price to be paid for serving the wider community. Caesar is taking from what belongs to God by promoting the view that it is a form of bigotry to hold, as the Church does, that marriage is between one man and one woman - and - by passing anti-discrimination laws aimed at this venerable teaching of the Church. Caesar is

also taking from what belongs to God in laws passed in several states that seek to criminalize services provided by churches to the undocumented.

In these and other instances, our government is not only taking what belongs to God; it is also taking from what belongs to human dignity and the common good. Again to quote the wise teachings of Pope Benedict: “Denying the right to profess one’s religion in public and the right to bring the truths of faith to bear upon public life has negative consequences for true development” (*Caritas in Veritate*, no. 56). For by imperiling religious freedom, all human rights are put at risk. After all, our deepest and most cherished rights are linked: the right to life, freedom of religion, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. And these rights are not granted to us by the State but by the Creator – as the Declaration of Independence robustly proclaims.

#### **IV. Conclusion: Human Freedom for the Good**

When Pope Benedict was welcomed to the White House in 2008, this is what he said: “Freedom is not only a gift but also a summons to personal responsibility.” It calls for sacrifice, for the development of virtue, for pursuit of the common good for a sense of responsibility towards the poor and vulnerable, and respect for the dignity of human life from conception until natural death. It requires of us courage to bring our deepest beliefs and values together with a spirit of reasoned dialogue to our fractured public debates. Indeed, “Freedom is ever new. It is a challenge held out to each generation and it must constantly be won over for the cause of good” (Benedict XVI).

How well Pope Benedict’s insights bring into sharp focus St. Paul’s exhortation to “pursue righteousness, devotion, faith, love, patience, and gentleness ... to be rich in good works, to be generous, ready to share ...” (1 Tim. 6:17). For through faith we see more clearly the dignity of the human person created in God’s image and likeness” (Genesis 1:26-17). Through faith we understand that every person is called to share God’s life. Through faith we see more readily what a truly just and humane society should be and we receive the strength we need to build a true civilization of truth and love. Faith serves the public life not only by the sheer magnitude of the humanitarian services it offers but indeed by its witness to those moral truths and values without which democracy cannot flourish.

And how much hangs in the balance! We continue to live in an age of martyrs – when believers, not just Christians, are being persecuted for professing and practicing their faith – when believers are tortured and killed because they are believers, in places like Iran, Iraq, China, and Nigeria. Let us keep the flame of faith and the flame of freedom burning brightly not only for our children and our children's children but also for the sake of these persecuted believers who see in our form of government and in our great land a beacon of hope. May God bless us, may God bless our Church and all believers, and may God bless these United States of America!