

# **“The Laws of Nature and Nature’s God...”**

This past Monday evening I attended my first Catholic Lobby Night – when Maryland Catholics meet in the state capital to learn about issues affecting our Church and to share concerns with their elected officials.

I found it appropriate (and a little ironic) that throngs of Catholics descend on Annapolis every Presidents Day. Appropriate because the event offers Maryland Catholics an opportunity to play an active role in the democratic process our nation’s founders envisioned for every American. Ironic because our secular society increasingly urges us to separate our belief in God from our contemplation of our rights and responsibilities and those of our brothers and sisters in citizenship. Yet I contend that it is not un-American to claim that God and the laws of God must be granted a role in the operation of America’s institutions.

In the very beginning of our Declaration of Independence we read that our system of government must be rooted “in the laws of nature and nature’s God.” These laws, naturally perceived and fundamental for the common good, were seen by most of our founding fathers as being enshrined in religion, broadly understood perhaps, but clearly reflected in the biblically based faith groups of the time.

Justice William O. Douglas’ declaration that we Americans are “a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being,” nicely complements the counsel of our first president:

“Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity,” Washington said, “religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man [call himself a patriot] who [would] labor to subvert these ... firmest props of the duties of men and citizens ... .” And so, said Washington, “Let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion.”

The theme of this year’s Lobby Night, “be there for others,” was drawn from our Holy Father’s most recent encyclical, “Spe Salvi” (“Saved by Hope”). It offered a

fitting backdrop for the challenging work that met the hundreds of Catholics in attendance Monday. From challenges to human life, to the plight of the homeless and the newest members of our American community, to our constant, uphill battle to obtain equal treatment for the children in our schools, the temptation to despair that Gospel values will never be given room in the public square is a very real one.

Catholics also came to Lobby Night to share concern for the sacred institution of marriage, radically threatened, in my opinion, by the inclinations of some courts of law and not a few legislatures to apply the legal status of marriage to relationships between persons of the same sex. My own opinion in this matter, I think it fair to say, is widely shared by a great many people of faith, no matter their denomination – people who believe that our laws, all our laws, especially those which so directly affect the human person, properly should be rooted “in the laws of nature and nature’s God.”

In the view of the American Catholic bishops, marriage between one man and one woman, with a view toward family, is a basic human and social institution ... indeed, the most basic of such institutions. True, the institution of marriage is regulated by civil law and church law, but it preceded them both. It originated from neither, but from God. Therefore, neither church nor state can alter its basic meaning and structure. Marriage, whose nature and purpose are established by God, can only be the union of a man and woman. The law should not have it otherwise.

Indeed, that marriage is a joining of man and woman, involving the gift of offspring, has been the cherished standard of Western culture time-immemorial. Of all human relationships, marriage has always been regarded by Western law with special significance and accorded special privileges. In doing so, it has reflected the universally accepted understanding that healthy marriages require the protection of law if our culture is to promote the welfare of its future generations.

To be sure, the campaign to change fundamentally the legal meaning and cultural significance of this central social unit is vigorous and determined, and has influential adherents. One prays that the pressures brought to bear by these formidable forces, or by the high emotion generated by the marriage debate, or by the temptation of political expedience will not cause our lawmakers or our justice system to enable

such a change.

To that end, I offer the following points to our elected representatives in Annapolis, as well as to all our Catholic people, many of whom are increasingly perplexed by a fiery debate that too often admits more smoke than light:

- At a time when family life is under significant stress, the principled defense of marriage is an urgent necessity to ensure the flourishing of persons, the well-being of children, and the common good of society. (USCCB) In short, the future of our society is forged in today's families, and marriage is the foundation of the family.
- While many of our fellow citizens might not take as seriously as we do, biblical and doctrinal truths in rejecting same-sex marriage, most want our legislature to maintain the privileged juridical status for traditional marriage.
- Neither our courts nor our state legislature should impose a different definition of marriage on our social order by assigning the legal status of marriage to any relationship other than the union of a man and a woman as husband and wife. They should not provide the same legal recognition to same-sex or other alternative relationships - whether they are called marriages, or civil unions, or given some other designation - as that which the law properly provides to the marriage of one man and one woman.
- To redefine marriage to respond to secularist, non-traditional standards, e.g., as simply a sincere commitment to love each other for life or to achieve mutual fulfillment, satisfaction and happiness, is to open the way, in principle, to a host of other "marital" friendships, thus rendering the very uniqueness of marriage meaningless.
- Our position will be open to fierce attack by extremists. While we are unconditionally opposed to same-sex marriage, we must unconditionally condemn unjust discrimination against homosexual persons whose dignity as daughters and sons of God we must accept, respect and defend.

With the General Assembly session approaching the mid-way point, the contentious political atmosphere of this and of many other social issues as they relate to modern

jurisprudence, might make sincere and objective dialogue difficult in the weeks ahead. I invite you to join me in praying that those elected to represent our interests will not sacrifice individual human dignity or sacred marital unity without reconsidering those timeless words of our Declaration of Independence: let our justice and its regard for this bedrock social institution of marriage be rooted “in the laws of God and nature’s God.”