

The New Evangelization and Religious Freedom: Malta Forum

I. Introduction: The Bad News before the Good News

During an election season, we are buffeted and surfeited with polls some of which seem to point in conflicting directions. For that reason I hesitate to bring up yet another poll but this one may well deserve our attention.

Recently the Pew Foundation did a survey of the state of religion in American life. A friend of mine, who is a judicious arbiter of such polling data, pointed out some of the highlights of this survey just to make sure that I was sufficiently alarmed.

First, about 16% of adults – about 33 million persons – have no religious affiliation and almost all of them say they are not interested in pursuing anything religious. It is not necessarily the case that all of these people are hostile to religion or to First Amendment constitutional principles but it is probably realistic to think they would be less sympathetic to religious values when they conflict with other social policies.

Second, while 31% of adults report they were raised in the Catholic faith, only 24% now describe themselves as Catholic. This statistic is felt more keenly in some parts of the country than others but I think it's safe to say that more than a few parishes have more empty pews than was the case previously. Some of this is offset by immigration and other factors, but there is some reason to think that our "base" may be shrinking.

Third, the percentage of Catholics who now disclaim any religious affiliation, or who are what might be called "lapsed" Catholics is greater among the ranks of younger American adults. There is reason to think that young people who have lapsed from the practice of the faith will be less likely to perceive threats to religious liberty or take them seriously. In passing I note that focus groups have found that many Catholics – some who practice their faith and some who don't – do not really perceive that religious freedom is significantly threatened. Our work is cut out for us.

II. Insights of Professor Mary Ann Glendon and President Garvey

This polling data confirms insights which such notable commentators as Professor Mary Ann Glendon of Harvard and President John Garvey of the Catholic University of America have shared. In an essay entitled, “Is Religious Freedom Becoming a Second Class Freedom?” – Professor Glendon advances the view that the primary challenges to religious liberty are not, in the first instance legal, legislative, or administrative, but cultural. As a godless secularism makes inroads into American culture, a way is opened to governmental challenges to religious liberty which would have been hard to envision only a generation ago. This does not mean that we cease to speak clearly against government incursions on the exercise of religion like the HHS preventive services rule, and especially the very narrow governmental definition of what constitutes a religion and religious activities embedded in the mandate, or against threats to religious liberty arising from same sex marriage laws & rulings. Rather, in my view at least, what is needed not an “either/or” strategy but rather a “both/and” approach to the problem: As a Catholic community, we need to continue the work of mobilizing ourselves so that we can robustly participate in the political process while at the same time recognizing the pastoral ground we have lost and resolving to address the situation with gifts of nature and grace God has given us.

Last year when President Garvey addressed the U.S. Bishops, I thought he laid out the situation compellingly – not as an idle social commentator but rather as one who cares deeply about the Church and her mission in the United States and far beyond. He first described some current challenges to religious liberty, such as the HHS mandate, the Hosanna Tabor Case, discrimination in awarding government contracts to qualified social service agencies because of their religious convictions, the DC Gay Marriage issue, and the like. Then President Garvey went on to ask why there has been a decline in respect for religious liberty. He does not claim there is only one reason, in fact he cites a number of reasons but this one should be of great interest to us as members of the Order of Malta: “Our society won’t care about religious freedom if it doesn’t care about God.” He added: “The best way to protect religious freedom might be to remind people that they should love God” . . . an analysis that is at once simple and bracing, and thus very like to be true!

III. The Mission of the Order of Malta

As you are aware, the Order of Malta has two parts to its mission summed up in one pithy Latin phrase: “tuitio fidei et obsequium pauperum”, loosely translated as ‘the defense of the faith & homage of the poor (and the sick).’ Both pertain to the New Evangelization and to the defense of religious freedom. In order to see this, we might spend a moment reflecting on each aspect of the mission of the Order and then, a little more time answering the question, ‘what is the new evangelization?’ Hopefully, all this will help us see a bit more clearly how the new evangelization and the struggle to preserve religious liberty are related.

“Tuitio fidei” does indeed refer to the defense of the faith. My trusty Glossary of Later Latin (600 A.D. ff.) tells me the word “tuitio” came to mean “legal or civil protection” (of the faith) and the need for such protection has become increasingly clear. When the Order was founded, the faith was defended on a horse by a Knight in a suit of armor, with a banner held high. We might wish it were that simple today. In our times, it is especially important that well-informed professional Catholics with varying areas of expertise and skill-sets help the Church defend the God-given right of individuals as well as of churches and church-institutions not only to worship freely but also to put church teaching into practice through works of charity, social services, healthcare, education and the like.

Building on that, I would wager that almost everyone in the room has paid some pretty exorbitant tuitions for your sons and daughters through the years and some of you might be enjoying that delightful experience even now. Tuition from the Latin, tuition, has come to mean “money paid for instruction”, but, true to its roots, it has to do with guarding and fostering the development of the young person that you are putting through school. So also, the Order’s mission is not only to defend the faith against external challenges but indeed to grow and foster the faith, to put faith into action, to express our faith not only as a set of ideas and rituals but as a way of life, in a word to engage in evangelization.

Now let’s spend a moment on the second part of the mission, namely, service to the poor and the sick whom we refer to as ‘our lords’. How closely this tracks the insight of Pope Benedict’s beautiful encyclical, *God Is Love*, where he tells us that charity – personal and organized – flows from what we believe and how we worship – it is not an “optional extra”.

Love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind is as essential to her as the ministry of the sacraments and the preaching of the Gospel. The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the sacraments and the Word (DCE, no. 22).

Indeed our charity is the overflowing of the love of God poured into our hearts, a sharing in the selfless yet passionate love of the three Persons of the Trinity, revealed by Christ and communicated by the Holy Spirit in Word and Sacrament. The charity in which we engage affirms the human dignity of those we serve, the very dignity that Christ came to restore and fully reveal. Blessed John Paul II coined a wonderful phrase to describe all this when he spoke of “a charity that evangelizes”— (cf. *Ecclesia in Europe*) not a charity that proselytizes but rather a charity which brims with the love, meekness, peacefulness, holiness, and joy befitting a follower of Christ. Indeed the twin pillars of evangelization are confessing the faith to the point of shedding one’s blood and selfless charity. These are also the pillars of Malta’s mission and they are inextricably linked.

This linkage is an indicator of why it is unacceptable for the government to define religion in such a way that it confines the practice of the faith solely to worship, solely to the church’s four walls. But this is precisely what the governmental definition of religion, embedded in the HHS mandate, does. It says that a church is religious enough to qualify for an exemption from having to violate its teachings by providing in its benefits plans insurance coverage for abortion-inducing drugs, sterilizations, and contraception only if it hires and serves mostly its own members and exists almost solely to teach and propagate its own doctrines. The moment it hires and serves others, contracts with the government to provide social services, advocates in the public square, and seeks to serve the common good, then, it is said, such churches and church institutions are behaving in a secular way and thus do not qualify for an exemption and must provide for pharmaceuticals and procedures judged to be immoral by the church which sponsors social services, health care, or education.

Obviously the government is drawing lines in our mission where we don’t draw them. That is why over 100 church entities around the United States have filed suit against the HHS mandate, including the Archdiocese of Washington and the

University of Notre Dame. It is embedded in our spiritual DNA that faith, worship, and service are linked. For, as St. Therese of Lisieux said, Love diffuses itself in wondrous ways! This you experience time and again as you engage hands on in the works of the Order. The Cross worn on your cape is the sign that God's love dwells in you and as members of the Order you are determined to share that love with those in need.

IV. The New Evangelization: Not Business As Usual

This brings us to the Year of Faith and the vision of Pope Benedict XVI for his papacy. Cutting through so much of the commentary in both the secular and religious press, I would submit that the heart of this pontificate is the New Evangelization and I would add that the defense of religious liberty needs to be seen as one aspect, one very important aspect, of the New Evangelization. But what is the new evangelization? To answer that question, we must look at the new situation in which the Gospel is offered with a newfound attachment to Christ and to the Church's faith.

In 1 Peter 3:15 we are exhorted to be ready always "to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope." Evangelization is a message of hope for the world and that message of hope is now more necessary than ever. The Church does not reject secular culture or genuine progress or indeed anything that is authentically human. Rather in offering a message of hope for the world, the Church seeks to engage the culture in which she finds herself and recognizes that evangelization requires not only the conversion of individuals but also a transformation of the culture from within. The drama of our time, however, has been the split between faith and culture, as Pope Paul VI rightly said in his groundbreaking 1974 encyclical, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

We don't have to scratch too far beneath the hard surface of secular culture to find the scandal of grinding poverty and poor education. At the same time, many people enjoy a good standard of living, and pursue careers and pastimes while putting on an upbeat 'public face' – yet when alone and not all buttoned up, they would say that life is hard and lonely and devoid of meaning because it has become so empty ... In the words of Johnny Lee's country-western song, they are "looking for love in all the wrong places."

This is true for so many people but especially the young who face challenges that most of us could not have imagined when we were growing up. About one in four children lives in poverty and many have seen their parents move in and out of jobs or lose their homes. One out of every two marriages ends in divorce. Many children are raised by the media, by the images, lives, and behaviors of sports heroes & celebrities they see there. The self-worth of young people is manipulated through advertising; messages are sent that nothing matters except success, success by any means, and a type of “success” that few attain and no one should really want to attain. There is little family time and adults and institutions often don’t set appropriate boundaries or communicate life-giving values. Add to that, so many children today are being raised without any religious practice. In a world of bullying, violence, scams, viruses, child abuse and trafficking, many young people are bound to wonder if they can count on anyone.

Christian Smith, a Notre Dame sociologist, has written prolifically about the spiritual and moral formation of young people. He tells us that young people have a sense of God but in their minds God is like a distant, kindly uncle who calls sometimes, who might send a gift one in a while, but who would never be a model for how to conduct one’s life or a reference point for planning one’s life or a mentor in finding the meaning of life. (See *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*, Oxford Press, 2011). In a similar vein, the New York Times columnist, David Brooks has found that young people today often don’t think in terms of morality – He quotes one as saying: “I don’t really deal with right and wrong that often” & many feel that moral choices are just a matter of individual choice (Sept. 12, 2011). It’s not that young people are necessarily immoral – rather, families, institutions, and schools have failed to help young people to cultivate that law written on their hearts which we experience as moral intuitions, and we have not given them the tools of moral analysis needed to evaluate the choices that are part and parcel of contemporary life. In a word, too many young people as well as many adults have concluded that they really can’t count on any one; and thus for all their freedom find themselves confined to a loveless existence. If this analysis holds any water at all, then it’s not hard for us to see how necessary and challenging the New Evangelization really is and, at the same time, how challenging it will be to maintain and foster religious liberty now and in the years that lie ahead. Both require a cultivation of mind and

heart that cannot be taken for granted. “Business as usual” is not sufficient.

V. Sources of the New Evangelization

At the beginning of his pontificate, Blessed John Paul II said:

Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible to himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it (Redemptor Hominis, no. 10).

Because of our baptismal vocation to love, we are called to be rooted in that love and truth which every person can depend on, that love which enables people to make sense of their lives, to find meaning & joy, that love by which Christ reveals us to ourselves – our dignity and our destiny. We are called to be credible witnesses to that love, but how can that happen?

More than anything else, the New Evangelization begins with the re-evangelization of the evangelizers ... put simply ... despite the fact that we may be life-long practicing Catholics who are actively involved in the life and mission of the Catholic Church & the Order, the Year of Faith is a call to open our hearts anew to Christ, to fall in love with him all over again, to re-encounter Christ almost as if it were for the first time. Pope Benedict tells us that “faith is standing with Christ so as to live with him”, and, in the memorable phrase of C.S. Lewis, we need to be ‘surprised by joy’ all over again! We may have moved from our childhood faith to an adult faith that has accumulated barnacles of skepticism, doubt, or even specious reasoning. But in this Year of Faith, we do well to beg the Holy Spirit to remove whatever distance has developed between ourselves & the Person of Christ so that we embrace him in faith and make our own Mary’s profession of faith, the model of complete & trusting faith: “Let it be done to me according to Thy Word.”

Having opened our hearts afresh to the Person of Christ, somehow the truth, beauty, coherence, and goodness of all that the Church teaches, including those things often thought to be out-of-step with the times, such as the Church’s teaching on marriage and the sanctity of life at its origins, begin to take on light, to make new sense, to dawn on us as if for the first time. They are no longer seen as a heavy yoke but rather words of spirit and life that express what it means to stand with Christ – body,

mind, and spirit. When love has found us, then, not only our hearts are opened but also our minds, such that the Church's rich intellectual tradition dawns on us with new clarity, for love always seeks understanding. This helps to equip us to re-propose the faith for family and friends, and to do so with the credibility and courage of those whose lives have been touched and transformed by encountering the Person of Christ afresh, such that we are not just proponents but witnesses, and courageous ones at that.

VI. New Evangelization and Religious Freedom

Now, let's tie together the New Evangelization & the defense of religious freedom. For us as believers, citizens, and members of the Order of Malta, these are not two separate and parallel projects but components of a single effort.

Most fundamentally, the New Evangelization and the defense of religious freedom both share a common point of origin, namely, the transcendent dignity of the human person made in the image of God with rights to life and liberty endowed by the Creator. Pope Benedict XVI put it this way: "If ever man's sense of being accepted and loved by God is lost, then there is no longer any answer to the question whether to be a human being is good at all Where doubt over God becomes prevalent, then doubt over humanity follows inevitably" (Address to Roman Curia, Jan. 2011). Similarly, when Blessed John Paul II asks, "What is the Gospel?" he answers, "It is the grand affirmation of the world and of man, because it is the revelation of the truth about God ... the primary source of hope & joy for man ... " (Crossing the Threshold of Hope, p. 20).

Our defense of the faith, our service of the poor and the sick, and yes, our defense of religious freedom converge on the human person, "the only creature whom God willed for his own sake" (CCC, 219). In the robust proclamation of the Gospel in the context of our times, the dignity of the human being continually comes to the forefront, as is so abundantly clear in the writings of John Paul II, Benedict, the Catechism, etc.

By re-encountering Christ and re-appropriating the Church's teaching in our own lives, we are equipped to re-propose the faith in its entirety to our contemporaries, most especially those who have become indifferent and live as if God did not exist.

This is not something we can do solely as individuals but as a community of faith. Although faith is deeply personal it is never private and the project of trying to narrow the gap between Gospel and culture requires of us all a unity of faith and love and intentionality. Dioceses, parishes, organizations that are in and of the Church have to be convinced that the New Evangelization isn't just a project but rather the Church's deepest identity, for the Church exists to transmit the Gospel and channel their prayers, planning, resources, and energies accordingly. When that happens consistently and over time, it will not be hard for most parishioners to see that religious freedom is their most precious God-given freedom. In a word, the ultimate protection for religious freedom is for more people to love God and to wholeheartedly practice their faith.

In re-proposing the Gospel with fresh joy and energy in the context of our times, we must see the Church's social teaching in its fullness not as a sidebar but as integral to all that the Church believes and teaches. It is not as if there is the Creed on Sunday and then this body of social teaching designed for those who can't quite warm up to things explicitly "churchy" such as the Incarnation, the Paschal Mystery, or the Real Presence, Catholic social teaching is not a substitute religion for those who have rejected what the Church teaches about personal morality, such as openness to human life, marriage as between one man & one woman, etc. We have to embrace the faith in its fullness and in its totality. What is taught about the humanity of the unborn child or the frail elderly is of a piece with what is taught about freedom of conscience and religion: both are expressions of the transcendent dignity and rights of the person, which are granted "not by the generosity of the state but by the hand of God" as John F. Kennedy put it in his inaugural address. Picking or choosing our beliefs not only undermines the unity of the faith-community but also, sooner or later, undermines the very human dignity we seek to defend.

Of course, we can't wait for the New Evangelization to be completed before we defend religious liberty by the means at our disposal such as seeking judicial relief, securing protective legislation, and the like. We recognize that such efforts are rendered more difficult when politicians, judges, and administrators perceive weakness in our ranks. Yet, it is often in defending our freedoms that we are evangelizing, for the very struggle to defend and preserve religious freedom offers many opportunities for the proclamation of the Gospel such as the Fortnight for

Freedom. In alerting fellow citizens to what is in danger of being lost, we have the opportunity of helping them to find what they have been looking for, their hunger and thirst for that unconditional love which only God offers us.

Then, too, we have to remind ourselves why it is we want to defend our freedoms. Naturally we want to defend them because history teaches us what tragedies ensue when secular governments begin to curtail fundamental human freedoms. Yet it would also be shortsighted on our part to defend the freedom of churches and church institutions only so that they could go about their daily work without undue governmental oversight or interference. Good as that is, it is not enough. Pope Benedict tells us that in every generation “... freedom must constantly be won over for the cause of good” (Spe Salvi, no. 24). We seek to defend religious freedom because we are seeking “the holiness of truth” (Ephesians 4:24) and because we seek to bear witness to the truth, and by engaging in “that charity which evangelizes” (see John Paul II Ecclesia in Europa).

Finally, during this month of October, let us ask the prayers of Mary, the Ever-Virgin Mother of God and of the Church. She is the ‘bright star of the new evangelization’ because she is ‘the woman clothed with the sun’ (Rev. 12:1). I am grateful to the Order of Malta for your witness to truth and freedom and I pray that the Lord will bless our common efforts now and in the years ahead.

Thank you and God bless you!