

**“You Are Catholics”:
Reflections on Catholic Political Responsibility in 2008 and Beyond**

Address to 2008 Catholic Men’s Conference
of the Archdiocese of San Antonio

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It’s so good to be here with you, my brothers! *¡Es muy bueno estar aquí con usted, hermanos!*

I look forward to your gathering every year. Your faith and love for our Lord Jesus is very inspiring to me.

In your commitment to holiness, to bringing the Gospel into your homes and into our neighborhoods and public life, you are a great sign of hope for our city, our nation, and our Church. *¡Muchas Gracias!*

I’m very grateful for the invitation to address you today.

We’re living in exciting times here in San Antonio and Texas!

We’ve just been through the whirlwind of the presidential primary and caucuses. All the media, all the emotion and the hype and activity.

You know: We all have a great stake in the outcome of the elections this year. There are big issues involved—the war and terrorism, immigration and the economy, health care for the poor, the future of the family, the defense of the unborn, the elderly, and the sick.

Because it is an election year, I thought it would be good to talk with you

about this very important topic—our political responsibilities as Catholics and as Americans.

I want to say first that I come as a pastor of souls, not as a politician.

My only agenda is Jesus Christ. St. Paul used to tell people: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). That’s my agenda, too. I want to help people to know and to love Jesus intimately, to walk with him in their daily lives, and to work for the building up of his kingdom and the spread of his good news and teaching.

This agenda of Jesus Christ has political implications, of course. That’s something I will talk about later.

But for now I want to assure you that I’m not here to tell you who to vote for. Or what the candidates should be talking about. Those are your areas of expertise and responsibility as Catholic laymen.

The question of politics raises deep issues for us, my brothers. There is great debate in the Church today about the status of Catholic politicians who reject Church teaching. About whether a good Catholic can vote for a policy or belong to a party that’s in open contradiction of Catholic beliefs.

There are crucial questions, too, in the wider culture—about the relationship of religion and politics, about whether we can really have civic virtues and values apart from traditional faith.

We can’t hope to answer these larger questions today. But I would like to try to think with you about some of the underlying issues, to get at the root of some of our problems.

My hope is that this will help us address some basic questions that should be very important in your lives: How should you approach your political duties both as citizens and as Catholics? How does your participation in our public life express your faith in Jesus Christ?

Building the Washington Monument

To begin our discussion, I want to go backwards first and look at some American history.

Almost all of you, I'm sure, have been to our nation's capitol.

Something that always stands out is the Washington Monument. And I'm sure you've noticed this too—the monument changes color about one-quarter of the way up. The stone at the bottom is a gray and white color, but then the color changes to a brownish white.

My brothers, those different colored stones tell a story about the history of Catholics in America. And this history explains something about the place of Catholics in American public life today.

The story is this: As construction of the monument got underway, Pope Pius IX sent a large stone to America that he hoped could be used in the monument. It was a gesture of his friendship and good will for the American people. The Pope didn't send any ordinary stone. His gift was a 2,000 year-old stone from the Temple of Concord in Rome.

To understand what happened next, we have to remember that this was a time of great prejudice and violence against Catholics in our country.

We tend to forget that back then bigots used to burn down Catholic churches and convents in America. Around the time we're talking about, a priest in Maine was tarred and feathered.

There were traveling carnival shows that would go around featuring people who claimed to be ex-priests and ex-nuns. They would go from town to town, telling awful lies about Catholics. There were even bestselling anti-Catholic books with titles like "Six Months in a Convent," and "Maria Monk's Awful Disclosures."

You may remember, too, the party called the Know-Nothings. Their purpose was essentially to drive out Catholics and immigrants from our country.

Abraham Lincoln once said: "As a nation we began by declaring that all men are equal. . . . When the Know-Nothings obtain control, it will read: 'All

men are created equal except Negroes, foreigners, and Catholics.’” (James Hennesey, *American Catholics*, 126).

So this was the environment when Pope Pius sent his gift to our country.

You can imagine what happened. The Know-Nothings heard about the Pope’s gift, and a rumor started. They said that once the papal stone was fitted into the monument, it would be the signal for the Pope and his allies in Europe to invade and take over America!

It sounds crazy, doesn’t it? But that’s how crazy the anti-Catholic spirit was back then.

So on March 6, 1854, before dawn, a group of Know-Nothings came and stole the stone the Pope sent.

Historians aren’t really sure what they did with it. Either the stone was smashed to pieces or it was thrown into the nearby Potomac River. Or maybe both. (Charles Morris, *American Catholic*, 54, 62–63)

Whatever happened, this violence halted all work on the monument. It would be another 30 years before it would be finished. By then they had to use a different marble, which is why we see the change of colors today.

The Legacy of Anti-Catholicism

Now, why did I tell you that story?

Because in order to understand where Catholics are today in America, we need to understand where we’ve been.

Catholics, for almost 150 years, were treated like second-class citizens. Good job opportunities were limited. Running for political office was unthinkable. Historically, this is one reason Catholics created our own “sub-culture”—our own schools, hospitals, social organizations, even our own newspapers.

The Harvard historian, Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr., once said that anti-Catholicism was “the deepest bias in the history of the American people.”

(Michael Schwartz, *The Persistent Prejudice*, 13)

This deep bias left a deep mark on Catholics.

Even on those of us who have never experienced the day-to-day anti-Catholicism that previous generations experienced. We inherited from those earlier generations a certain way of living our faith in the public square. A certain way of being Catholic that, unfortunately, is comfortable with compromising our religious identity.

On the surface, things would seem to be much different today than they were in the 1840s and 1850s.

Today Catholics are by far the largest religious group in the country. There are Catholics on the U.S. Supreme Court and many Catholics in Congress. There are Catholic governors and mayors, and Catholics serving in state legislatures, municipal governments, and in the federal and state court systems.

But the question we need to ask is: With a Catholic majority, and Catholics in many high places, why haven't our faith and values had more influence on American life?

There are many complicated reasons. But one thing I've been thinking about lately is this legacy of anti-Catholicism.

During all those years when Catholics faced discrimination, we developed certain habits of thinking and acting.

Probably to put it too simply: Because of all the bigotry, Catholics have always been forced to try harder to "fit in." We've always had to prove that we were "more American" than everybody else.

This caused a certain hesitancy in proclaiming the faith, especially among lay people. It also encouraged a kind of compromise and accommodation with the mainstream culture.

It's a fair question today to ask whether Catholics are more American than they are Catholic.

“ . . . Who Happens also to be a Catholic ”

What we see today is a distinct mentality among many Catholic politicians and even many ordinary Catholics when it comes to their relationship to American culture and politics.

It is a mentality that tries to separate the demands of the faith from the pressures of the culture or the political environment.

You hear this mentality being expressed whenever Catholic politicians say things like, “You know I’m personally opposed to abortion, *but* it’s the law of the land and my constituents support it, so I must vote for it.”

That position is wrong on every level. It reflects the worst kind of moral reasoning. But I think we can understand it as the product of years of Catholics trying to “fit in.” To prove the compatibility of their beliefs with the American political system.

The turning point, I think, was the 1960 presidential election, and then-Senator John F. Kennedy’s famous speech about his faith and politics.

The context for the speech was, again, anti-Catholicism. Pure and simple. A great many of our Protestant brethren didn’t trust a Catholic to be our president. So Senator Kennedy had to address this head-on. He did that in this speech, which he delivered to a Baptist group in Houston in September 1960.

Near the end of his speech, Kennedy said: “I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I am the Democratic Party’s candidate for President who happens also to be a Catholic.”

This is revealing. And it explains what he said right after that.

He made a promise: “Whatever issue may come before me as President. . . . I will make my decision in accordance with . . . what my conscience tells me to be in the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressure or dictates. . . . But if the time should ever come . . . when my office would require me to either violate my conscience or violate the national interest, then I would resign the office.”

These sound like very honorable, reasonable statements. And they are. So what's wrong with them?

The first problem concerns Catholic identity. The question is: Who are you? *¿Quién eres?*

Are you a Democrat? A Republican? An Independent? Is that who you are, fundamentally? Is who you are what you do for work, your function in society, or which political organization you belong to?

I say, No. I say First, you are a Catholic! A believer in Jesus Christ! You are a child of God by baptism! You are not Democrats or Republicans who “happen also to be” Catholics. You *are* Catholics, my friends. *¡Ustedes son Católicos!*

President Kennedy did not seem to get this. He seemed to be saying that his faith—his identity as a Catholic—was secondary to the office he was running for.

But that can never be. The Catholic Church isn't a voluntary association or simply a human institution. It's the kingdom of God begun here on earth, the family of God built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets (Eph. 2:20).

To be a Catholic is to be an heir to the Father's covenants of promise (Eph. 2:12). It is to accept Christ as our way, our truth, and our life.

What President Kennedy did was to “compartmentalize” himself. In one compartment he put his faith as a Catholic. In another his work as a politician. And as he described it, there was an absolute wall of separation between those two compartments.

That brings me to the second problem with the speech. President Kennedy's view of conscience. He seemed to regard his conscience as a kind of “inner light” that would guide him. But he seemed to reject the notion that his faith, expressed by the teachings of his Church, should have any influence on his conscience.

This is another example of how Kennedy tried to “compartmentalize” himself. And his ideas were very, very different from Catholic teaching

about the conscience.

Catholics and Political Responsibility

Where does all this leave us today, my friends?

I've tried to trace the roots of some of our problems in evangelizing our political culture. I've made a case that a lot of our problems stem from our historical experience of anti-Catholicism. The Kennedy speech of 1960 is the culmination of that experience.

And I think, too, that this speech has shaped the direction of American Catholic political participation in the last fifty years. Remember, that speech was very successful. He won the presidency. And I believe that many Catholic politicians since then, maybe without being aware of it, have taken Kennedy's approach to faith to be their model for how they can succeed in our political culture.

Anti-Catholicism today is very different than it used to be. It's not gone away, that's for sure. We see it in San Antonio, and we see it in places like the New York Times and CNN. It is more subtle and sophisticated now. But it's no less bigoted.

What's also different today is that anti-Catholicism is now part of a broader, anti-religious prejudice in our culture. I have talked about this often. More and more, in order to participate in our society, people are required to forget their faith, to "privatize it," and to act as if God doesn't exist or isn't important.

This creates even more pressures for Catholics to build a "wall of separation" between their faith and their participation in the culture. So it's not surprising to find many Catholics, not just Catholic politicians, doing the same thing that President Kennedy did.

We see them treating their conscience as if it's only concerned with private, "religious matters." We see them disregarding or downplaying what the Gospel and the Church have to say about moral, political, and social issues.

This is a sensitive subject, I know, my brothers. But we need to talk about these things if we are to truly do our Lord's work in this culture.

As I said at the beginning of this talk, I want to emphasize it again here near the end: I come not as a politician, but as a pastor of souls.

As a pastor of souls, I have a duty to preach the Gospel. The Gospel tells us that God didn't create us to lead "double lives." God doesn't call us to be Catholics on Sundays and something else the rest of the week or only in our "off-hours."

¡Ustedes son Católicos! No matter how much any of us thinks we can "compartmentalize" our faith. No matter how much we try to separate out our relationship with God from our political attitudes and actions, we can't do it.

God judges us as individuals, my brothers. He doesn't have one judgment for our private faith and another for what we do in public.

Faith is a personal choice. But the choice of faith binds us to a visible community, the Church. To say we are Catholics means that we have a solemn duty to live like Catholics—not only in private, but in public as well.

This applies not only to Catholic politicians, but to Catholics in all walks of public life—talk-show hosts, journalists, teachers, civic leaders, everyone. Even you.

You have to remember brothers, as ordinary citizens, your contributions to political discussions or to the political process must always be faithful to the Gospel and the teachings of the Church. We cannot allow our prejudices or our fears to ever obscure our witness to Christ.

This is the point I want to leave you with today, my brothers.

This is the beginning of Catholic political responsibility in this new century: If we are Catholics, then our faith in Jesus Christ and his Church should animate everything we do—our thoughts, our actions, our work, every decision we make.

The Gospel calls us to do more than just "fit in" or to accommodate our political culture. The Gospel calls us to conversion. To be converted ourselves and then to convert others. We are called to a heroic love of God

and our neighbor. As Catholics we are called to be courageous. To have the fortitude of the martyrs.

How many men and women sacrificed, suffered, and died to bring the Catholic faith to this country!

We are not called perhaps to give up our lives. But we are called to bear witness to the Gospel—even if our secular culture, our political party, or our neighbors don't like this witness.

Our first duty, whether we are politicians or ordinary citizens, is to commit ourselves to holiness. We must drink from the living waters of Christ, in his word and in his sacraments, and in the authoritative teachings of his Church.

But we are called to holiness *in the world*.

As I also said at the start today, the agenda of Jesus Christ has political implications. Our faith is not private. Because the Gospel is the Gospel of love. And love is not selfish, but self-giving.

As St. John said so beautifully: We can't love God whom we cannot see, if we don't love our brothers and sisters whom we can see (1 John 4:20). And love is more than a sentiment, a good feeling.

Love is faith and hope in Christ. Put into action. Transformed into a way of life. This love brings us deeper into God's own love for our brothers and sisters. And we must seek to translate that love into social structures and the right ordering of our society.

As Pope John Paul II reminded us when he was in San Antonio 20 years ago: "Works of mercy, justice, and compassion are basic to the history of the Church in the United States" ("Meeting with Representatives of Catholic Charities," Sept. 13, 1987).

It is your political responsibility as Catholics to play your part in that history of God's love for his sons and daughters in America.

Catholics cannot leave America without a witness to the truth about the human person. About the sanctity of human life.

There are some values that are non-negotiable. The sanctity and dignity of human life, the protection of human life in every stage—from conception to natural death; the defense of the human family as founded upon the marriage of man and woman.

We cannot compromise or accommodate our culture on these values, my friends. They are at the core of the Gospel and they are the foundation of civilization.

Abortion and euthanasia represent profound moral evils because they are direct attacks on life itself. And a Catholic may never cooperate with evil. We must always oppose policies, programs, and people who would violate human life or weaken its protection.

As John Paul said: “The right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture—is false and illusory if the right to life, the most basic and fundamental right, and the condition for all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination” (*Christifideles Laici*, 38).

It is your ultimate political responsibility as Catholics to see that our government, at every level, defends this right upon which all others are founded.

Thank you for your invitation my friends.

I hope you will forgive me for giving you such a “heavy” talk. But I felt that these issues needed to be discussed this year, especially with you, because you are so vital to the new evangelization of America.

I urge you to spend some time in prayer contemplating the figure of St. Joseph, whose feast falls within Holy Week. Let him be your example as you seek to struggle against evil and in the service of Christ’s saving mission for America.

And may Our Lady, his most blessed spouse, watch over you and your families, and bring you all the joy of her Son’s resurrection!