NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

MSW in Colorado

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 9, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

I was thrilled to be able to speak to a group of interested Catholics here at the University of Colorado at Boulder. My hosts, the Thomas Aquinas Institute, could not have been more gracious. And, as you drive toward this city, at one point, you cross a hill and see the town with the Rockies looming behind and you wonder why anyone would live anywhere else. Then you start to notice that virtually every car has a bike rack, and all the pedestrians seem unnaturally healthy and fit. In any event, here is the text of the talk I gave.

The Libertarian Threat And How Catholic Social Teaching Can Heal What?s Wrong With American Politics

?Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar?s, but unto God the things that are God?s.? This verse of Scripture is where most Americans start their commentary on the relationship between Church and State. What usually follows is, of course, a discourse rooted in dualism, that is, the idea that there is some chasm between government and God, that in our lives it is best to keep the two separate, indeed, one would almost think that our Lord Jesus had the First Amendment in mind when he spoke those words. I would demur and only note that, for us Christians, everything belongs to God.

The Church and her teachings never fit neatly into any particular political framework, including the American political framework. Many of the issues in contemporary political life have many answers and people of good will and good conscience can disagree, and disagree profoundly, as to which answer is best, which problems are more urgent and what methods are best suited towards achieving goals about which we agree. We may all agree that improving the economy is something that is desirable, but we can disagree about how to achieve such an improvement. But, as Catholics, we must always be willing to say that there are certain solutions, certain methodologies, certain ideologies, that are incompatible with our Catholic understanding of the human person.

That is my first point: American democracy?s relationship to religion is, as it has always been, more sloppy than precise, more improvisational than programmatic. The line between Church and State and more generally between religion and society is always a contentious line and the line between religion and politics is porous, imprecise, difficult to spot, even historically.

These facts are not unique to America on account of our democracy.

The boundary between Church and State was contentious when the Pharisees asked Jesus whether they should pay taxes.

When Thomas Becket was killed at the behest of King Henry II, the relationship between Church and State was hardly ideal.

It was contentious when King Henry VIII demanded that all his subjects take the Oath of Supremacy, and St. Thomas More accepted martyrdom rather than swear to the Oath

It was contentious, certainly in colonial America. We Catholics are justly proud of the fact that the only colony founded by Catholics, Maryland, passed the first legislative enactment regarding religious liberty in 1649, but we like to forget that within a few years, the government of the Catholic proprietor, Lord Baltimore, was overthrown, and the first law to go was that guaranteeing religious liberty, making our early Catholic contribution to religious liberty a mere footnote in history with no practical consequence. Catholics were then barred from holding political office, then from voting at all. We were forbidden from holding Mass in public.

It is one of the most over-looked facts about the years leading up to the American Revolution that the ideology most invoked by the patriots, the arguments put forward in favor of independence from Great Britain, the attitudes and assumptions about politics, all were drenched in fiercely anti-Catholic attitudes. The First Continental Congress, deeply imbued with the writings of anti-Catholic Britons, wrote an Open Letter to the People of Great Britain, a letter drafted by John Jay, who would go on to become the first Chief Justice of the United States, but adopted by the entire Congress. The letter had this to say about Catholicism, and I quote, ?a religion fraught with sanguinary and impious tenets,? and, quoting again, ?a religion that has deluged your island in blood, and dispersed impiety, bigotry, persecution, murder, and rebellion through every part of the world.? Quick question: How many here have ever heard of this Letter to the People of Great Britain in your history classes?

The generation of the founders was demonstrably anti-Catholic. The first publication to come from the pen from John Adams was a diatribe against Catholicism?s canon law. The most frequently published pamphlets invoked the memory of the Puritan ideologues who had removed the Catholic King James II from the English throne. As late as 1745, the Jacobites were still trying to reclaim the throne of England until the Battle of Culloden brought disaster to their arms and to their cause. The French and Indian War had seen Catholic France as the great threat to the civil and religious liberties of Englishmen. All this led to a view of politics that was especially hostile to Catholicism. The next time you hear someone speak about the profound Christian impulses that motivated the founding fathers, remember that they were not motivated by Catholic religious impulses.

The adoption of the First Amendment did not resolve matters. Otherwise, how to explain the continued persecution of Catholics in the United States? Public schools required Bible reading and prayer, but it was the Protestant Bible that was read and Protestant prayers that were prayed. Efforts to get public funding for Catholic schools were met with riots. Groups like the YMCA were organized to keep nice little Protestant boys free from the dangers of Catholic neighborhoods and the Temperance Movement took direct aim at Catholic cultural practices: I am half Irish and half Polish so I face the existentital Catholic question every night: beer or vodka? In the 1920s, the people of the state of Oregon passed a referendum effectively shuttering the Catholic schools of that state by making attendance at public schools compulsory. Also in the 1920s, strict immigration laws were enacted to keep largely Catholic populations from Europe from entering the U.S.

I mention these historical events because we all have a tendency to think that the circumstances we face are unique, and that our times are, as Dickens said, the best of times and the worst of times. Actually, we Americans tend to think our times are the worst OR the best, not both. But, the human condition being what it is, I suspect Dickens was closer to the mark. So, while there is nothing particularly new about our current debate about how Catholics should engage this year?s election, I would suggest that we can and should look to some areas of constancy that our Church?s teaching authority has set down as markers. I would like, tonight, to speak about three of those constants: The necessity of forming one?s conscience, the need to promote and defend the dignity of the human person, and, finally, the role of government in defining and advancing the common good. Then I will conclude with a final observation about how most Catholics, on both the left and the right of U.S. politics, need to take a giant step back and reconsider their entire moral framework.

Why should we look for constants? The need for a more thoughtful perspective, rooted in something other than

cable news polemics, can be seen in the debate we have had this past year regarding the HHS contraception mandate. A funny thing happened during this debate. A symmetry emerged between the most histrionic voices on both sides. One side, which we can associate with the more extreme voices on the Catholic Left, said, ?It doesn?t matter what Obama does, the bishops are all Republicans and so they hate Obama and they will find a new way to make war against him.? The other side said the exact same words, only with the subject and object of the sentence reversed, ?It doesn?t matter what the Church does, Obama is a Democrat and so he hates the Church and he will find a new way to make war on her.? Whenever both sides of an argument employ the exact same language to denounce their opponents and make their own case, it is incumbent upon everyone to take a step back, set aside their prejudices, and look more deeply at the issues that are at stake.

It has been suggested that the reason the HHS mandate was seen as a Catholic issue was because the Church has a quirky position on the subject of contraception. But, the actual policy issue was not only about contraception; it was about an employer mandate. The reason this was seen as a ?Catholic issue? was because the Church employs so many people in its schools, its hospitals and its charities. The original mandate drew a distinction between houses of worship, which were exempt, and religious institutions like charities and schools, that were not exempt. This is a distinction we Catholics must categorically reject. Religion, for us, is not something we only do on Sunday and amongst ourselves. Our faith leads us beyond the walls of the sanctuary of our churches, into the highways and byways of human suffering. Our faith compels us to heal the sick, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to care for the immigrant, to instruct the ignorant. These actions are as integral to our faith as our Sunday worship. Some Protestants may have a hard time realizing this because of their traditional concern about the relationship between faith and works.

It is true that many of our Catholic institutions were built because our forbears, fighting anti-Catholic bigotry and Nativism, were denied access to mainstream institutions or because those mainstream institutions, and I am thinking here especially of colleges and universities, were inimical to Catholic ideas. The Catholic ghetto grew out of necessity, and the experience of a ghetto, especially a splendid ghetto, creates a sense of tribal identity. During the recent debate, the Obama administration seems to me to have been completely unalert to that tribal identity and so, could not anticipate a backlash that spanned the usual political divides. Longtime supporters of the administration recoiled at the prospect of the institutions fashioned in the Catholic ghetto of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century being told to do something against their conscience by those outside. Even if, as many polls indicate, most Catholics in the U.S. disagree with their bishops on the subject of contraception, they did not want any outsider entering a family disagreement. I may disagree with my Dad, but he is still my Dad and if someone outside the family criticizes him, I am going to defend my Dad, even if he is wrong and even if I know he is wrong. Something similar, I think, happened with progressive and conservative Catholics alike uniting behind the bishops in defense of Catholic institutions in the face of what they perceived as a non-family member entering into a family debate.

But, there was something deeper than a tribal reaction at work, something that has to do with the way Catholics understand the 25th Chapter of the Gospel of Matthew to be sure, but something too about the nature of the Christian Church. During the debate, there was much talk of conscience, and some pro-choice advocates countered our Catholic objections about the rights of conscience our institutions should enjoy, by asserting the conscience rights of employees. This assertion was not nonsensical. In America, we view all rights as essentially individual rights. The ?libertas ecclesiae,? or liberty of the Church, is unknown in the American legal and constitutional framework. In this regard, we can say that America?s constitutional and legal framework is derived not only from ideas associated with the Enlightenment, but with distinctly Protestant understandings of religion. For the early Protestants who most profoundly shaped American culture, religion was a private affair, a relationship exclusively between the individual and God. Each and every individual Christian was free to interpret the Bible as he or she saw fit and there was no mediating authority other than the Bible. The Puritans

and the Baptists and Methodists shaped the thought of future generations of Americans about religion in many and enduring ways, and those ways were reinforced by Enlightenment ideas about the role of religion in society as well, ideas that further encouraged a view of religion as an essentially private affair.

Needless to say, this is not a traditional Catholic view of the matter although, regrettably, many U.S. Catholics have grown unable to recognize the differences between a Catholic view of religion and conscience and the view held by the ambient culture, drawn from Enlightenment and Reformation ideas about what religion and conscience are, and how they function in a culture.

After the president announced his ?accommodation? for some of our religious institutions, an accommodation that has proven less satisfactory in the details than in the concept, the bishops? conference began emphasizing a different argument. They have insisted that all employers and individuals, including secular employers and individuals, should be able to exempt themselves from the HHS mandates. This is bad politics to be sure: Catholics were able to force the Obama administration to make an accommodation for Catholic institutions, but they are not going to go to the mat for the conscience rights of Taco Bell.

There is a deeper problem with this idea that any individual, citing his or her conscience, should be able to exempt themselves from a government mandate. We should not feed the individualistic beast in our hyper-individualistic culture. If we posit that all individuals have an unfettered right to conscience exemptions from laws enacted as part of the common good, which is clearly how libertarians view the matter, what is the role of the Magisterium? And how do we differentiate between conscience and whim?

Those who support this argument cite *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Second Vatican Council?s Decree on Religious Liberty, #2:

?This Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits.?

First, of all the conciliar documents, *Dignitatis Humanae* is the worst one from which to cull one paragraph and not the entire text. The document represented a compromise in many ways and because no one could create a genuine synthesis between the ideas of John Courtney Murray and the European theologians who resisted his views, between a negative conception of liberty and a positive conception of liberty. Both views reside somewhat uneasily within the same document. Murray himself acknowledged this difficulty, speaking of the ?difficult and troubled waters, that the Declaration itself tried to skate around.? Alas, we can no longer skate around these issues.

Second, even in #2 you find an example of the care with which Church teachings are crafted. Those words ? ?within due limits? ? at the end, do not defeat but they certainly condition what went before. The right to conscience is manifested within a political culture in which other important values must be made manifest, most obviously public order, which concerned Murray, but also the common good. Vatican documents tend to always have this kind of qualifier, to keep any of the truths they proclaim from running amok, Lord Acton?s famous definition of heresy. In this case, the heresy of an excessive belief in human autonomy as the essential key in political life is qualified by the ?due limits? imposed by other political considerations.

For Catholics, religion is a group activity. This is rooted, we believe, in our most central doctrine, the Trinity, which holds that God is not some atomistic unmoved mover, nor a foundational philosophic principle, but a God whose essence is love itself, expressed in a profound relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We believe that through baptism, we are invited to participate in the divine life and love of the Trinity. Consequently, all we do, our teaching as well as our worship, must be done together. But, to teach authentically,

the bishops? teaching must be drawn not merely from the challenges of the moment in a given place and country, but must take account of what the universal Church teaches and what she has always taught. We are in communion not just with those who gather at Mass in our parish church on Sunday. We are in communion with the Church of Rome, and the Church of Mexico City, and the Church of Paris, and the Church of Jakarta. We are in communion with the Church of the fourth century and the Church of the thirteenth century and, even though it is sometimes difficult for theologians to admit it, in communion with the Church of the years immediately preceding the Second Vatican Council. It is that eternal teaching, which we call apostolic, that must inform our consciences.

At the Second Vatican Council, Blessed Pope John XXIII called all Catholics to discern the signs of the times, he called for an aggiornamento, a bringing up-to-date of the Church?s teaching. This was indeed necessary as the teaching of the Church had become dry and arid, expressed through a singular, and most would argue stilted, reading of St. Thomas Aquinas. In response to the intellectual challenges of the Enlightenment, our teaching had become defensive, and was demonstrably incapable of engaging modern man with his experiences and ideas. But, we were called to DISCERN the signs of the times, not to adopt them wholesale. Discernment suggests weighing what is good and rejecting what is bad. A young theologian, one of the ?radicals? at Vatican II, wrote in 1966 of the renewal of the Church?s teaching at Vatican II, ?[this renewal?s] point of reference is contemporary man in his reality and in his world, taken as it is. But the measure of its renewal is Christ, as Scripture witnesses Him.? It will surprise no one to recognize that those words are the words of a still young Joseph Ratzinger.

Nowhere is this need for discerning the signs of the times with Christ as the measure more important than in our understanding of conscience. ?Conscience? and ?freedom? may be the most ambiguous words in the English language today. But, their meaning is not ambiguous to us Catholics. Conscience is not whim. Conscience is not permission to do whatever one pleases. It is not private judgment.

Yet, this is how it is used in common parlance. Nonetheless, for us Catholics, conscience is the voice of God Himself, speaking to us in the concrete situations of our day, calling us to do right and avoid wrong. Here is Blessed John Henry Newman, from his famous Letter to the Duke of Norfolk:

?The rule and measure of duty is not utility, nor expedience, nor the happiness of the greatest number, nor State convenience, nor fitness, order, and the pulchrum. Conscience is not a long-sighted selfishness, nor a desire to be consistent with oneself; but it is a messenger from Him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by His representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ, a prophet in its informations, a monarch in its peremptoriness, a priest in its blessings and anathemas, and, even though the eternal priesthood throughout the Church could cease to be, in it the sacerdotal principle would remain and would have a sway.?

That text is arresting in every way ? the words ?aboriginal Vicar of Christ? ring in one?s ears, do they not? And, Newman finished his letter to the Duke by famously observing that if he were asked to give an after dinner toast to the Holy Father, he would toast the Pope, yes, but conscience first. This letter of Newman?s had a profound influence on our young theologian from Bavaria who is now our Pope and I hope it will have a profound influence on all Catholics. If you listen to your own conscience, and you only hear your own voice, or the voice of your political party, or the voice of the editors at the New York Times, you need to listen more deeply. Conscience is not what you may wish. It is not what the crowd invites you to think. You may recall ? or you may be too young to recall ? a cinematic device of years past. A person would be facing a problem. A devil would appear on one shoulder saying, ?Go ahead, do it.? A little angel would appear on the other shoulder, saying, ?You know better.? That little angel is the voice of conscience, the voice that tells us we must or must not do a certain thing, that we know better.

Conscience must be rooted for us in the revelation of Jesus Christ, as that revelation is made manifest to us in our Scripture and tradition and through the Magisterium of the Church today. Christ is the measure. Yet, God chose many prophets, not one, and twelve apostles, not only Peter. We know from the Acts of the Apostles that not all the twelve saw eye-to-eye on every matter and we know from our reading of the Hebrew Scriptures that the vision of, say, the wisdom literature, which suggests a kind of natural ethics, stands in stark contrast to the vision of man?s natural capacities put forward in the Book of Job. Although God does not contradict Himself, He reveals Himself differently to different people in the course of human time. Thus, we can affirm that the guidance the Church offers us in the formation of our consciences may be authoritative, it may be persuasive, but it is never precisely definitive, better to say, the teaching must always be applied to a concrete set of circumstances and that it where our individual conscience comes in.

Three and one-half years ago, we saw how consciences can differ during the controversy of the decision of the University of Notre Dame to continue its tradition of inviting the President of the United States to deliver the school?s commencement address and receive an honorary degree. Some were outraged, insisting that a pro-choice politician, even though he was not a Catholic, should not receive an honorary degree from a Catholic institution. Some were outraged by the outrage, noting that while they too found President Obama?s views on abortion objectionable, the idea that you would fail to invite the first African-American president in the history of the nation to come to Notre Dame entailed a different kind of moral blindness. The 2009 recipient of Notre Dame?s Laetare Award, Ambassador Mary Ann Glendon, decided not to share the stage with President Obama, so Judge John Noonan, also a conservative Catholic and legal scholar, and a previous recipient of the Laetare Medal, gave the Laetare address instead. He spoke these words about Ambassador Glendon?s decision:

?One friend is not here today, whose absence I regret. By a lonely, courageous, and conscientious choice she declined the honor she deserved. I respect her decision. At the same time, I am here to confirm that all consciences are not the same; that we can recognize great goodness in our nation?s president without defending all of his multitudinous decisions; and that we can rejoice on this wholly happy occasion.?

How is it that two conservative Catholics of impeccable intellectual and moral character could reach such different conclusions? As we have seen, the Church?s teachings, which guide our conscience, permit different emphases. In the case of President Obama?s appearance at Notre Dame, some thought his pro-choice position so egregious that he should not be welcome on a Catholic campus. Others, while just as committed to the pro-life cause, recognized that the president?s faulty position on that issue did not disqualify us Catholics from celebrating other aspects of his political agenda or even the fact, the important fact, his election represented in the life of the nation, one more long step in America?s effort to rid itself of its original national sin, racial animus.

Conscience must be formed, and formed again. We learn from our experiences, or at least we are invited to learn from them. In politics, we are very foolish if cannot learn to tell this difference between a campaign promise and a real commitment to a governing idea. I am a Democrat. The fact that my party does not agree with me on the sanctity of all human life including the unborn is cause for great concern. It pricks my conscience. But, I confess that I have watched five Republican presidencies come and go since Roe v. Wade, and I have reached the conclusion that those pro-life Catholics who vote Republican on this one issue have not gotten very much for their vote. There is a parable in the Gospels about this. One says tells his father he will do his will, but then changes his mind and does not do it. The other son says at first that he will not do as he is asked, but then he, too, changes his mind and actually does it. Which one fulfilled the dictates of conscience? Which one did his father?s will?

I dwell at some length on the role of conscience because, as you know, the bishops? document on voting is entitled ?Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship.? The bishops do not issue a voter guide. This is no

checklist. They do not tell us how to vote nor whom to vote for. Instead, they give us some key ideas, and an overall framework, for shaping our own consciences. That framework is drawn from the Church?s long tradition of social teachings. Sometimes, this social teaching is called ?the Church?s best kept secret.? It is time to let others in on the secret. In a word, the twin pillars of Catholic social teaching are human dignity and the common good. We believe that all society, including politics, should enhance, not diminish, human dignity. And, because we believe that human persons are, by nature social and by grace called to communion with others, we believe it is part of the human vocation to achieve the common good of all. Selfishness, you might say, is not only a private sin, but a sin against our nature as social beings called to communion with each other and with God.

One final point about conscience before we move on. I compared conscience to the good little angel on our shoulder, telling us to do what is right. But, conscience actually goes deeper than mere moral judgment. Moral judgment points us to how conscience works, but the existence of conscience, the fact that we have that little voice inside speaking to us, points beyond moral judgment to what we call theological anthropology. God speaks to us through our very natures. He speaks to us intimately, more intimately than we can speak to ourselves. And, because God?s voice is, in a sense, inside us, that should inform more than our moral assessments. It should demand a stance towards the world and the people in it, a stance that also reflects the love that is at the heart of our understanding of the Trinity. I will return to this idea of theological anthropology at the end of my talk.

In the modern era, Catholic social teaching became more explicit than previously, starting with Pope Leo XIII?s 1891 encyclical Rerum Novarum. Since then, various popes and bishops have elaborated the Church?s social teaching, always applying these twin concerns for human dignity and the common good to the issues of the day, usually in ways that challenge the dominant political ideologies. For example, Pope Leo argued against socialism and communism, insisting that the Church recognizes the right to private property but, against laissez-faire capitalism, Leo argued that property rights are never absolute, and that all social systems, including the economy, must enhance human dignity and serve the common good. Most of all, Leo warned against any political or socio-economic agenda that was materialistic, that denied the transcendent and spiritual in the life of the human person.

The human person ? and the dignity which attaches to that person ? is at the center of Catholic social thought. The concept of human dignity is strange. We possess it simply by reason of being a person, but we can frustrate it and diminish it, or we can augment it and protect it, both as individuals and as a society. But, for Catholics, any government, any economic arrangement, any legal code, any political agenda must be evaluated in terms of whether it recognizes and cherishes human dignity or whether it threatens it.

For Catholics, the source of human dignity is found first in the Imago Dei, the biblical idea that we are made in the image and likeness of God. This fact is enhanced, its depths revealed, by another doctrine, the Incarnation. In becoming man, Jesus became our brother, giving human dignity something it could not have provided for itself, an invitation to communion in the divine life of the Trinity. All that we know about God has been revealed, definitively, in the self-revelation of Jesus Christ, but it is this same Jesus Christ who reveals who we are. As Gaudium et Spes #22 states:

The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him Who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to himself and makes his supreme calling clear. It is not surprising, then, that in Him all the aforementioned truths find their root and attain their crown.

Human dignity, then, is not primarily rooted in an ethical claim, but in a theological one. This is important.

Our liberal tradition ? and here I intend the word liberal in its broadest sense, the sense in which almost all Western politics are considered liberal ? also puts human dignity front and center. The liberal tradition,

however, arrived at its conclusions via a different route. They wanted to overthrow regimes built upon privileges of birth, inequalities of wealth, and, yes, the special role given to the Church. Liberalism, deeply imbued with ideas drawn from the Enlightenment, understood the human person in more autonomous terms and, given the social, political and cultural realities against which they were rebelling, this is understandable. The liberal tradition has, through various turns in the road, found its noblest expression in the ideals expressed in the United Nations? Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948.

There is an enormous amount of overlap in the conclusions of the Catholic and liberal tradition. Both assert that the human person enjoys negative freedom, or a freedom from, certain restraints by government. Our consciences should be free from coercion, our right to engage in politics should be unfettered, we have the right to engage in publishing our ideas and associating ourselves with others, and no man nor society can deprive any of us of these rights without treading on our human dignity. In the Catholic tradition, of course, such negative rights are balanced by certain responsibilities: We have the right to speak our minds, but with that right goes the responsibility to speak in ways that are respectful of others and their dignity. In our liberal tradition, there is no such legal responsibility that accompanies a legal right. The difference can be seen in evaluating the recent riots throughout the Muslim world in response to the video made by a madman that insulted the Prophet Mohammed. In the liberal tradition, that video was protected free speech. It may have been vulgar, it may have been offensive, but it was protected. In the Catholic tradition, the right to free speech is, emphatically, balanced by the responsibility not to abuse that right by propagating such vile, incendiary material.

Both traditions also, in different ways, recognize that human dignity demands certain positive rights, a freedom for or to, not just a freedom from. So, both the UN Declaration on Human Rights and countless papal encyclicals insist that the human person has a right to life, to food and shelter, to healthcare, and further insist that if a person, or a community cannot guarantee such rights, then it is incumbent upon government to step in and secure them. I know this is contentious in the minds of some libertarian friends, but the Church could not be more clear on this. Our traditional teaching on subsidiarity favors solutions to problems that are closest to the person, but the word subsidiarity itself comes from the Latin, subisidium, to help, and the idea of subsidiarity insists that the right level of society be engaged to help. And, so, I do not think anyone can, with a straight face, conclude that after more than sixty years of trying to enact universal health care in the U.S., during which time the market failed ? self-evidently ? to secure this basic right, the government has not only the legal right but the moral obligation to step in and reconfigure the market, or to replace it, to secure this fundamental right.

Human dignity, then, resides in every individual because they are human, but it is not individualistic because it is shared by all. And, it points us towards the next critical concept from Catholic social teaching, the common good.

The common good, in Catholic eyes, is more than the sum total of individual aspirations. It is not the same as the utilitarian greatest good for the greatest number. It is, instead, the idea that because we are all in this together, as individuals and families and communities and a country and, indeed, as inhabitants of this one planet, we have to watch out for each other, we have to make decisions that allow all to flourish, we have to care for our environment because it does not belong to us and we can not rifle through its resources without regard to future generations. In short, while each of us as individuals has a unique personal destiny, we also share, in a meaningful way, a common destiny. And, this sense of common destiny is expressed through various agencies of civil society but most especially through government.

John Carr, who recently stepped down as the director of the USCCB?s Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, where he served for 25 years, has noted that perhaps the most counter-cultural aspect of the bishops? document on voting, ?Faithful Citizenship,? is that it upholds politics as a good. We Americans have long enjoyed heaping scorn on politics and those who practice that craft. Mark Twain famously opined: ?Suppose I were a member of Congress. And suppose I was an idiot. But I repeat myself.? We Catholics must

resist that view, and we must invite our politicians to practice their craft in such a way that they do not demean the noble calling that is theirs. Politics is not the only way a culture discerns the common good, but it is the principal means by which certain aspects of the common good are discerned and acted upon. I cannot, on my own, protect the environment, nor guarantee access to health care, nor provide income for our senior citizens. We need government to do these things, and these are good things to do. I encourage all of you, especially the students here, not only to vote, but to make sure your representatives know how you feel on issues. There is in Washington an aristocracy of interest groups, many of them well-funded, whose access to, and influence upon, political leaders must continually be checked by constituents who are not slavishly devoted to particular ideological positions but who champion the common good. Write letters. Make phone calls. Run for office yourself. There are few things more morally obtuse than a man who complains endlessly about politics but does not avail himself of the means our free democracy furnishes for finding solutions to those complaints.

I mentioned earlier that the words ?conscience? and ?freedom? may be among the most ambiguous in our contemporary political culture, and we have looked at conscience already. Let us now turn to the issue of freedom, in part because it is a foundational concern of the American experiment in governance and also because the Introductory Note to Faithful Citizenship cites religious liberty as one of its principal concerns.

This is not the place for a disquisition on the scholarship of the concept of liberty ? nor am I qualified to give one. But, it is important, I think, for even a commoner in the Academy to recognize that there are difficulties between what Sir Isaiah Berlin called the negative conception of liberty at the heart of the First Amendment, the idea that one should be ?free from? coercion by government, and what St. Paul meant when he spoke of the ?freedom of the children of God.? These difficulties were not resolved by Vatican II?s Declaration on Religious Liberty. These are the ?troubled waters? of which Murray spoke. And, clearly, one of the themes of this pontificate has been that ideas of freedom untethered to ideas of truth become not only brittle but feeble, unable to defend not only other important human goods besides freedom, but unable to even defend freedom itself. As I say, I am not the person to solve these difficulties ? I am neither learned nor smart enough. I can say that one of the tasks of Christian humanism in our day is to rescue the undeniable achievements of modernity, including its emphasis on freedom, from the faulty anthropology that has so far accompanied it.

I can also say that we do not have to go far into these deep, troubled philosophic waters to recognize the threat that libertarianism poses today not only to Catholicism but to liberalism. Libertarianism perfectly fits the description of heresy as ?a truth run amok.? Libertarianism takes a genuine, and proper concern for personal liberty, and turns it into the sole criterion of political judgment. We hear its exponents say that the sole purpose of our Constitution was to protect individual liberty when, as the Preamble of that document clearly states, our government is also charged with providing for the common defense and promoting the general welfare. Libertarianism is the political heresy that denies there is any such thing as a common good.

The cancer of libertarianism has afflicted both political parties. For Democrats, it manifests itself in areas of personal, and mostly sexual, liberty. For Republicans, it manifests itself on issues of economic policy and social justice. Have you noticed that pro-choice Democratic women speak about their bodies in exactly the same way as libertarian Republicans speak about their incomes? ?It?s mine. You can?t tell me what to do with it.? Of course, the law has always told us what we can and can?t do with our bodies. We are not free to put a gun in our hands and shoot another person. We are forbidden from ingesting controlled substances. If we drink, we are forbidden from putting our bodies behind the wheel of a car and attempting to drive. It is the same with income. Taxes are there for a reason. They pay for the things that no individual can accomplish on their own, from infrastructure to schools to national defense to basic research that has no immediate profit motive but which might yield many profitable applications.

The threat of leftist libertarianism is the more obvious as the abortion rate attests. But the threat of conservative libertarianism may yet be more dangerous because the threat is more pervasive. Ours is a consumerist culture.

That is how we define ourselves. And so when libertarianism takes hold when our wallets are concerned, watch out.

America is quite unique among modern, industrialized democracies in that it has always been simultaneously a deeply religious culture and a deeply materialistic culture. De Toqueville commented upon this, so it is hardly new. But, in the past several decades, America has become less religious and more materialistic so I believe that the threat posed by economic libertarianism is the more profound threat we face today. It was chilling, during one of the GOP primary debates, to hear the audience cheer the prospect of letting a patient die in the hospital because he lacked health insurance. It is chilling to hear those who champion budget cuts above all else, but who also tout their pro-life credentials, suggest that we should cut foreign aid, including those programs that fight malaria in the many impoverished nations of the world, programs that are manifestly pro-life. It is chilling to hear a variety of Social Darwinism championed, a vision of society in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and so long as the iron laws of laissez-faire economics are followed, no one should complain. I use the term ?Social Darwinism? advisedly because this hyper-individualism is as often as not accompanied by a hatefulness that is similar to the brutishness of the state of nature. There is an ignorance of history in such a worldview: A society that embraces this survival of the fittest nonsense is a society doomed to civil strife. Has Congressman Ron Paul ever read A Tale of Two Cities?

Some Catholics have also been busy distorting Catholic social teaching. Mr. George Weigel never misses an opportunity to mis-characterize the Church?s teaching about subsidiarity, viewing it as a one-way street opposing government intervention in the marketplace. Of course, subsidiarity is a two-way street, recognizing not only a preference for solutions to societal problems at the appropriate level and ideally closest to the person involved, but also recognizing the need for government to intervene when intermediate social actors, such as the family, the community, and local government, have failed to secure basic human necessities like access to health care. Subsidiarity, subsidium, assistance, should be given at the appropriate level of society.

And, on the left, one still hears the tired refrain that it is not our place as Catholics to impose our religious beliefs on others, as if such a thing were possible in our democracy, or that one can be personally opposed to a grave social evil but feel no compulsion to do anything about it, or that our concern for the homeless and for the immigrant somehow should not be extended to the unborn.

I do not think you have to be particularly imaginative to grasp where the next threat to human dignity is going to arise: the elderly. The secular left is embracing euthanasia ? there will be a referendum on euthanasia in Massachusetts this autumn and powerful and wealthy interests are coming together to advocate for it. At the same time, the libertarian right is asking the nation to consider privatizing Medicare because it is too expensive. And, their proposed cuts in Medicaid will make it harder for many families to afford long-term care for the elderly. The cost of caring for the elderly through Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security has indeed been rising and looks to be larger still in the years ahead. Think of all the fun things we can do with that money if we could convince the elderly to kill themselves or strip them of their health care? It is barbaric. Protecting the elderly should become an issue around which all Catholics, left and right, can find common ground.

Similarly, immigration reform strikes me as an issue in which pro-family conservatives and social justice liberals should join hands. It is un-Christian and un-American that our government separates children from their parents and husbands from their wives because a family may have members with different legal status. The border between the United States and Mexico was not put there by God and crossing that border does not make one less than human. As Catholics, we are always, always called to recognize the human dignity of all, whether they be undocumented immigrants or unborn children. We Catholics should always stand for the ?un?s? ? the unborn, the unemployed, the undocumented, the unlearned, the un?s, those whom the rest of the society thinks are beyond help or beneath concern. That is who we should stand for.

What can we do? What can you do, as members of the Catholic intellectual community. I would note here that pro-life Democrats and pro-immigration reform Republicans may be the most precious political actors in our culture because their views cannot be dismissed by their fellow party members as mere partisanship. Yet, it is precisely such politicians who are the most likely to be challenged, vilified, labeled as RINOs ? Republicans In Name Only ? or as Blue Dog Democrats, both terms delivered with derision. Indeed, because they are willing to break with party orthodoxy, they are seen as traitors, betrayers of the party, and powerful more rigidly partisan groups try to take them down. This sort of thing has been going on throughout the election season as one group of Catholics sets itself up as Grand Inquisitors to denounce, not the judgment, but the faith of other Catholics. Any of us who cherish the art of compromise and, more importantly, hope to affect change in our culture to make it more welcoming to both the unborn and the undocumented, and more protective of the elderly, must protect these politicians who are willing to argue within their own parties for a different, more humane, view on these contentious issues. Defend them, give them some wiggle room. It is not easy being a pro-immigration reform Republican or a pro-life Democrat.

The other thing we must do is educate ourselves and our children in the rich resources of our Catholic tradition. ?Christ is the measure,? as Pope Benedict wrote. At this time in our nation?s history, when both of our parties are afflicted with the cancer of libertarianism, our long tradition of Catholic social thought provides us the ground upon which to stand and fight the idea that man?s autonomy is the only thing to know about him. The Church has within herself a tradition which, it seems to me, answers the gravest challenges facing American politics today. We are not infringing on anyone?s liberty, nor their conscience, by bringing our faith into the public square, indeed, our faith may be, and I believe is, the thing that might save America from mistaken understandings of conscience and freedom and human dignity and the common good, mistaken understandings that have led us astray. It is not we who should render unto Caesar today: It is Caesar who stands in desperate need of hearing what we Catholics have to say about the human person, about human dignity and the common good, and about human conscience and freedom.

Source URL (retrieved on *09/17/2014 - 00:43*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/msw-colorado