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Symposium on Religious Diversity and the Common Good Closing Keynote Address

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I am honored to be here today with so many people I admire.

It's generous of you to have someone who has worked as a journalist and, yes, as a pundit, especially in light of the words of Pope Francis. He has offered a warning that should strike fear in the hearts of columnists and pundits everywhere. "If one has the answers to all the questions," he said in that famous August interview with *La Civiltà Cattolica* that has become a kind of manifesto for his papacy, "that is the proof that God is not with him."

That delightful rebuke to know-it-alls everywhere provides a clue as to how someone who has held the papal office only since March has already revolutionized—there is no other word—the world's view of the Roman Catholic Church. At a time when religion has come to seem synonymous with dogmatic certainty and, in the eyes of many secular observers, fundamentalism, here is arguably the most visible religious leader in the world asserting that questions, not answers, can inspire a vibrant faith.

I think there is much to learn from Pope Francis on the subject we have been discussing here (and I confess that more liberal or progressive Catholics can get giddy just quoting Francis) and I will get back to him before I close.

But first, I want to make the simplest point of all, a point that everyone in this room is aware of. It is this: We know that the best form of ecumenism, the best way to tear down barriers of suspicion and mistrust across religious lines, is for people of good will in all faith traditions and none to work together in service to others, particularly the

marginalized, the needy, and the endangered. Marie Griffith put it well (and she knows I like this passage of hers).

“Concern and compassion are ... evident today in both liberal and conservative religious circles, as witnessed by the widespread attention...to the crisis in Darfur and the global catastrophe wreaked by AIDS. In these and many other global causes, American Christians and Jews have worked alongside Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs and other religious parties whom many once would have shunned and with whom they may continue to disagree theologically.... Advocates of religious pluralism point to this array of dramatic encounters and collaborative work among disparate religious parties as proof that strong religious adherence begets not only violent conflict but also also dynamic partnerships across partisan lines.”

It would, actually, be lovely to devote this entire talk to such partnerships. They are happening right now in the Philippines as human beings give help and comfort to those suffering from an unimaginable disaster. They are happening all across our country in homeless shelters, schools, senior centers, community development projects, soup kitchens, parks and gyms, hospitals and hospices.

But alas, as this conference as shown, matters are never that simple. There is, first, the difficulty of reaching agreement on the proper role of faith in the public sphere of a free and pluralistic society.

Reporters who have covered papal travels, as I once did with John Paul II, regularly ransack his sermons for a political angle that might interest their editors back home. After reading through a packet of papal addresses one day during a trip to Africa, a wire service colleague complained loudly -- and he was speaking tongue-in-cheek but describing a real problem -- that he didn't know what to write because "there's nothing but religion here."

Over the years, I have wondered if that phrase “there’s nothing but religion here” was a description of one or another of the American political campaigns I covering. That was especially true in 2000 and again in 2004.

One of the most famous personal declarations of faith came from George W. **Bush** early in the 2000 presidential campaign. A moderator in a debate in Iowa asked each of the Republican candidates to name the "political philosopher or thinker" with whom he most identified. **Bush** replied, crisply and somewhat abruptly, "Christ, because he changed my heart."

Bush was not alone in naming **Jesus**. Gary Bauer cited Christ's commands to help the hungry, the thirsty and the poor as a guide to social policy. Orrin Hatch agreed with **Bush** in seeing **Jesus** as a guide, but added the interesting aside: "I think that goes without saying."

Hatch's comment goes to the heart of the controversy **Bush** unleashed: Are we better off when a candidate's religious faith "goes without saying?" Would it be better for religious tolerance if all candidates were to stand with Democrat Bill Bradley, who said

in a later debate that year with Al Gore that he would never criticize anyone else's "open expression of their faith," but added: "I've decided that personal faith is private, and I will not discuss it with the public."

Alan Wolfe long ago described our peculiarly American confusion over religion and public life when he said, with perfect pitch, I think: "Two hundred years after the brilliant writings of Madison and Jefferson on the topic, Americans cannot make up their minds whether religion is primarily private, public, or some uneasy combination of the two."

But it is surely a legitimate public issue if a candidate's religious convictions will affect the way he will govern. Isn't that something all of us should want to know? "In principle," my friend Bryan Hehir told me at the time – I always turn to Bryan for wisdom on hard questions -- "it's appropriate for a religious candidate to make known and explain his religious convictions. It leads to a richer and more informed public debate."

But like many at the time, I was deeply bothered by the way Bush made his Des Moines declaration. Unlike Bauer, Bush did not explain how Christ's teachings affected his view of policy. I was even more put off by Bush's reply to a follow-up asking him to tell viewers how Jesus had changed his heart. "Well," Bush replied, "if they don't know, it's going to be hard to explain."

As a Catholic, I found these words exclusionary and even condescending -- that if you didn't have his specific kind of religious experience, he couldn't possibly explain to you what you couldn't understand. My reaction turned out to be typical. In the post-debate commentary, the harshest attacks on Bush's statements came from Catholics, Jews and others outside the evangelical Protestant orbit.

On the other hand, many evangelical Protestants were just as put off by the attacks on what Bush said. They saw the criticism as an assault on their own forms of religious expression. "That's how we talk about our faith," said a Southern Baptist friend who is a staunch Democrat and had no use for Bush as a presidential candidate, but found herself defending his Iowa remarks.

"Bush," my conservative friend Mike Cromartie said at the time, "was describing a personal, existential subjective experience that was real for him, but was put in language and terminology unfamiliar to the Jewish religious experience and the Catholic religious experience."

I'd insist that one price of religious freedom in a pluralist society is that if presidential candidates choose to express their religious views to us, they have an obligation to explain themselves in ways accessible to all of us, and provide information that has some bearing on how they would govern. That's why Bauer's answer was far better than Bush's.

"Religion is certainly about the heart, but it's about more than the heart," Father Hehir said.. "It's about an intellectual structure of belief, and a candidate needs to explain what that intellectual structure is about. And that was totally missing from Bush's answer."

So, by all means, let candidates be candid in sharing their religious convictions, and may the rest of us be respectful. But once candidates choose this path, they need to explain exactly why the information is relevant to whether we should make them president.

So one point I'd like to underscore is that religious freedom, pluralism and tolerance impose dual obligations. Each tends to be more congenial to one side of our politics than to the other.

On the one hand, it is entirely legitimate for religious citizens and politicians to bring their faith to the public square. This is an essential right to freedom of expression.

But pluralism demands that we -- citizens and politicians alike -- make these views intelligible to those who are not part of our own tradition and that we advance arguments that speak to the entire community. I may believe that my faith creates an obligation to the poor that includes action by government. In my case, I actually do believe that. But I don't think it is sufficient for me to say that others should support, say, universal health care coverage, because Jesus or Micah or Amos would say we should do so. We might well use Jesus or Micah to explain ourselves and to give our case power, poetry and the sanction of tradition. We might well challenge those inside our own tradition who disagree with us to square their own views with what the tradition teaches. But when talking to a libertarian agnostic or to someone who is "spiritual but not religious," we must make our case in terms that they can accept.

One model we need to revisit and revive, I'd suggest, is what might be called Civil Rights Christianity. Its approach was resolutely centered not on the defeat of adversaries, but on their conversion -- not conversion to a particular faith, but to a new ethic. Civil Rights Christianity spoke, in Dr. King's words, of speeding the day "when all of God's children -- black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics -- will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

Civil Rights Christianity helped create a movement many of whose heroes came from outside the Christian tradition. Some were atheists. In creating a broad, open, faith-inspired movement, it showed that tolerance and pluralism did not lead inexorably down a road to relativism. It was a movement whose values were clear and whose call to civic virtue and equality was tough, persistent and inspiring.

"The end is redemption and reconciliation," King declared at the beginning of his ministry in 1957. "The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness."

Yet we need to be careful here: there is a temptation to see ecumenical efforts in the political sphere as always a form of progress, especially when those ecumenical efforts advance the political cause of the side we happen to be on. In fact, I learned something important some years ago from Alan Wolfe -- as you can see, I've learned a lot from Alan. The danger is that we are replacing old forms of religious division with new forms

of political division, and in the process are subjugating and marginalizing faith itself by putting it to the service of politics. Here's what Alan wrote: [p. 210]

This, in turn underscores a problem that Michael Ignatieff brought alive for me in his just-published book, "Fire and Ashes," about his experiences as leader of Canada's Liberal Party. As the title suggests, it was a rough experience for this academic in politics and his Liberals suffered a devastating defeat in 2011.

But Ignatieff used his experience for the purpose of instruction, as the good teacher that he is, and he raised a question we need to confront. That is the question of "standing," as he put it. One of the most insidious tendencies in politics, but also in religious life, is the rush to deny those we disagree with standing.

"Standing," Ignatieff writes, "is a word from the law that means you have the right to have your day in court. ... Granting someone standing is not displaying deference. It is showing democratic respect." We might add: it is showing spiritual respect, too.

"In the degraded politics we are enduring," he goes on, "the explicit goal of attack is to avoid debate, to avoid the risks that go with a free exchange of ideas. Once you have denied a person standing, you no longer have to rebut what they say. You only have to tarnish who they are."

"In this perversion of the game, politics is modeled as war itself," he writes. "The aim is not to defeat an adversary but to destroy an enemy by denying him standing. We need to attend carefully to where all the loose macho talk about politics as war can lead. War, Carl von Clausewitz said, was the continuation of politics by other means, but politics is not the continuation of war. It is the alternative to it. We care about politics, defend it, seek to preserve its vitality, because its purpose is to save us from the worst."

Now I do not want to wish away the hard questions – notably what do people of faith who believe in tolerance and religious liberty have to say to those who do not believe in these things. Being "nice" in the face of persecution may well be what Jesus taught when he urged us to turn the other cheek. But those of us who do enjoy religious freedom cannot simply turn away from our brothers and sisters who suffer persecution for their deepest beliefs.

But surely part of our witness must be to avoid denying standing to those whose religious views do not match our own. Religious freedom for those whose faith we share can only be sustained if we also stand up for those whose religious faiths – or lack of faith – differ from our own. And tarnishing whole belief systems by pointing only to the behavior of those who use such faiths in oppressive ways is a classic of denying our brothers and sisters standing.

But as I promised, I want to close by talking a bit more about Pope Francis, because, as I said at the outset, he does have a lot to teach us in this area.

Let's not pretend that he is anything but an orthodox Catholic. Francis is orthodox, all right. He has reasserted the church's "clear" teaching on abortion and said he could

not do otherwise. “I am a son of the church,” he explained. But he is an orthodox searcher who wants to share the journey with anyone of goodwill (including nonbelievers) who takes the quest for truth seriously.

“Who am I to judge?” he replied when asked his view of those who are gay. For so many, judging is precisely what a pope does for a living. Francis did not change church doctrine with his statement. He merely changed virtually everything about how we see the role of a supreme pontiff.

A pope who sees lifting up the poor and moralizing an unjust economy as primary objectives inevitably views the culture wars that so engage Catholic conservatives, particularly in the United States, as a peculiar rock on which to build the church’s public ministry. This view has brought him criticism from the Catholic right, as he has acknowledged. But putting the culture war in its place is consistent with a papacy that finds its inspiration outside the ongoing arguments among liberals and traditionalists in the developed world.

“We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage, and the use of contraceptive methods. This is not possible,” he said in one of the most widely cited parts of his interview, as published in English in the Jesuit magazine, *America*. “I have not spoken much about these things, and I was reprimanded for that.

But when we speak about these issues, we have to talk about them in a context.... The dogmatic and moral teachings of the church are not all equivalent. “The church’s pastoral ministry,” he went on, “cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently.... We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel.”

Francis seems to want to move the church outward, from the nave of a dark cathedral to the bright garden outside its doors.

Again, the pope is not changing church doctrine. But a major change in emphasis itself has profound implications.

Much is expected of this pope: serious reform of the Vatican, a substantial decentralization of authority, a definitive reckoning with the pedophilia scandal, and, among Western Catholics especially, a broadening of the “opportunities for a stronger presence of women in the church,” as Francis himself has put it.

In global terms, however, here may be the central paradox of his papacy: As the leader of a church that has so long been viewed as dogmatic, hierarchical, and traditional, Francis bids to turn himself into a model of a kind of mystical humility that combines a spirit of moderation with intellectual openness and a radical understanding of what the primacy of the spiritual over the material means.

Pope Benedict issued a stern warning against a “dictatorship of relativism.” Francis seems worried about something else entirely. “If the Christian is a restorationist, a

legalist, if he wants everything clear and safe, then he will find nothing,” Francis has said. “Tradition and memory of the past must help us to have the courage to open up new areas to God. Those who today always look for disciplinarian solutions, those who long for an exaggerated doctrinal ‘security,’ those who stubbornly try to

recover a past that no longer exists —they have a static and inward-directed view of things. In this way, faith becomes an ideology among other ideologies. I have a dogmatic certainty: God is in every person’s life.”

Thus is his one “dogmatic certainty”—a thoroughly undogmatic universalism more interested in shattering barriers than erecting them, more interested in winning converts than in hunting heretics. It’s a very new approach to religion in the modern world, rooted in the oldest of doctrines. An undogmatic universalism that sees God in every person – that is the rock on which we can build openness, tolerance, ecumenism and a faith that proclaims that all us should be free at last, free at last, thanks to God Almighty.

Thank you.