

Difficulties and Hopes of the Catholic Church in America

From the Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Bishops of the United States of America on their "Ad Limina" Visit

*Consistory Hall, Vatican City
Thursday, 19 January 2012*

Today in the Vatican Benedict XVI received a group of prelates from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (Regions 4 and 6), at the end of their "ad limina" visit. Extracts from his English-language remarks to them are given below.

"At the heart of every culture, whether perceived or not, is a consensus about the nature of reality and the moral good, and thus about the conditions for human flourishing. In America, that consensus, as enshrined in your nation's founding documents, was grounded in a worldview shaped not only by faith but a commitment to certain ethical principles deriving from nature and nature's God. Today that consensus has eroded significantly in the face of powerful new cultural currents which are not only directly opposed to core moral teachings of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but increasingly hostile to Christianity as such.

"For her part, the Church in the United States is called, in season and out of season, to proclaim a Gospel which not only proposes unchanging moral truths but proposes them precisely as the key to human happiness and social prospering. ... With her long tradition of respect for the right relationship between faith and reason, the Church has a critical role to play in countering cultural currents which, on the basis of an extreme individualism, seek to promote notions of freedom detached from moral truth. ... The Church's defence of a moral reasoning based on the natural law is grounded on her conviction that this law is not a threat to our freedom, but rather a 'language' which enables us to understand ourselves and the truth of our being, and so to shape a more just and humane world".

"The Church's witness, then, is of its nature public: she seeks to convince by proposing rational arguments in the public square. The legitimate separation of Church and State cannot be taken to mean that the Church must be silent on certain issues, nor that the State may choose not to engage, or be engaged by, the voices of committed believers in determining the values which will shape the future of the nation.

"In the light of these considerations, it is imperative that the entire Catholic community in the United States come to realise the grave threats to the Church's public moral witness presented by a radical secularism which finds increasing expression in the political and cultural spheres. The seriousness of these threats needs to be clearly appreciated at every level of ecclesial life. Of particular concern are certain attempts being made to limit that most cherished of American freedoms, the freedom of religion. Many of you have

pointed out that concerted efforts have been made to deny the right of conscientious objection on the part of Catholic individuals and institutions with regard to cooperation in intrinsically evil practices. Others have spoken to me of a worrying tendency to reduce religious freedom to mere freedom of worship without guarantees of respect for freedom of conscience.

"Here once more we see the need for an engaged, articulate and well-formed Catholic laity endowed with a strong critical sense vis-a-vis the dominant culture and with the courage to counter a reductive secularism which would de-legitimise the Church's participation in public debate about the issues which are determining the future of American society. ... In this regard, I would mention with appreciation your efforts to maintain contacts with Catholics involved in political life and to help them understand their personal responsibility to offer public witness to their faith, especially with regard to the great moral issues of our time: respect for God's gift of life, the protection of human dignity and the promotion of authentic human rights".

"No one who looks at these issues realistically can ignore the genuine difficulties which the Church encounters at the present moment. Yet in faith we can take heart from the growing awareness of the need to preserve a civil order clearly rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, as well as from the promise offered by a new generation of Catholics whose experience and convictions will have a decisive role in renewing the Church's presence and witness in American society. The hope which these 'signs of the times' give us is itself a reason to renew our efforts to mobilise the intellectual and moral resources of the entire Catholic community in the service of the evangelisation of American culture and the building of the civilisation of love"

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