

Reflections of a Chaplain to the United States House of Representatives.

Prelude

In 1775 as delegates from 12 of the 13 U.S. colonies traveled to Philadelphia, they were most likely focused on how they might represent the interests of their respective colonies, over against a “national” political body that might limit their freedoms.

At the time, religion was, for the most part, “state-supported” in many of the colonies. Protestant Christianity, if not officially endorsed, was presumed normative by the vast majority of colonials, as Catholics made up 1% of the colonial population.

Maryland was founded by the Roman Catholic Lord Calvert, 2nd Lord of Baltimore, but the 4th Lord Baltimore was a Protestant, and the “Catholic” colony had become officially anti-Catholic.

And so, when Charles Carroll of Maryland signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776, he did so as a Catholic who hoped that his co-religionists would be free to exercise their religion in the incipient Republic. 235 years later the largest single denomination in the United States is the Roman Catholic Church. It has been suggest that the second largest group is ex-Catholics.

So when those representatives gathered in Philadelphia in 1775, it was not odd when it was proposed that the deliberative session might begin with a prayer. All colonial assemblies had done so up to that point.

What was odd was that, for the first time, experienced legislators habituated to opening prayers were confronted with the reality that though gathered for a common political purpose, they were not gathered with their respective co-religionists.

Anglicans, Congregationalists, Quakers, and those of other Protestant denominations, not to mention the rare Catholic, were not accustomed to praying, officially, with one another. It is probable they never prayed together unofficially either.

And so, what was to follow was, I believe, an “American Pentecost.” When it was proposed that the First Continental Congress begin with a prayer, Samuel Adams of Massachusetts, which was a Congregational, not an Anglican stronghold, proposed an Anglican clergyman, the Rev. Jacob Duchet, to be invited to offer the prayer.

The Rev. Duchet proceeded to offer a prayer so inclusive, and non-denominational, or, if you will, non-partisan, that all of the gathered men could respond “AMEN.” A prayer has opened every legislative session in the United States ever since.

Might it have been that for the first time in the history of the human race men realized that they could be united politically without having to be united religiously? Perhaps for the first time, it dawned on men that the unity of a political state did not have to have the endorsement, nor authority, of a state religion.

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I have been invited to speak about my experience of being the Chaplain to the House of Representatives of the United States. I do not wish to insult the intelligence of any gathered here, but also do not wish to presume the conceit that you should all know well the structure of the American political landscape. So I propose to present a short primer.

Our government has three distinct branches: The Executive (the President, and the multitude of administrative departments that

execute the laws of the land), the Legislative, made up of two houses: the Senate, composed of 2 Senators from each of the 50 states, who serve 6-year terms, and the House – for which I serve as Chaplain – made up of 435 Members who are elected every two years.

The third branch is the Judicial. There are 9 Members of the Supreme Court, who serve life-time terms. It is interesting to note that 6 of these are Roman Catholic, and 3 are Jews.

So I am not Chaplain to the President of the United States, nor to the Supreme Court, nor to the Senate, which has its own chaplain. He is a 7th Day Adventist who is a retired military chaplain. Prior to his appointment, he served as the Chief of Naval Chaplains, a two-star Admiral. I was a 9th-grade theology teacher who coached a girls' sports team.

This actually illustrates the difference between the American Senate and House of Representatives. The Senate is a much more exclusive legislative “club.” Some Senators must earn the votes of millions of voters.

The House, to which I am chaplain, is properly called the Peoples' House. There are 435 Members, each representing approximately 700,000 "local" constituents. Their congressional districts spread throughout the continent. They are extraordinarily distinct.

New York City has 8 Members in the Peoples' House. Its urban political and social issues are enormously different from those of the entire states of Alaska, Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota and South Dakota, each of which has only one Member in the House.

For those unfamiliar with American geography (which you would have in common, by the way, with way-too many American citizens), those 5 states make up a territory two-thirds the size of Western Europe. Those 5 states have fewer congressional representatives than the city of New York.

Among its membership are a rocket scientist, university professors, physicians, military veterans, secondary school teachers, labor leaders, ordained ministers, farmers and former professional athletes. Their levels of formal education run the entire spectrum of no college education whatsoever to multiple post-graduate degrees.

The Peoples' House, in other words, is a cross-section of the American population.

At this point in time, the House of Representatives, as an institution, has an approval rating among all Americans, of from 5 to 10%. If the Members are elected popularly and locally, how can this be? I might suggest that while each Member is sent to represent the interests of their voting constituency, that very representation almost guarantees frustrated attempts to legislate for the benefit of the entire country.

The differences in culture, urban v. rural, uniformity v. diversity, northern v. southern, plus the multiplicity of races and nationalities making up a nation of immigrants from its inception, make for an incredibly complicated political experiment.

And then there is religion.

For the first 50 years of its existence, as mentioned, the United States was almost exclusively Protestant. Today, of the 435 Members of the House of Representatives, 134 are Roman Catholics, or 31%, while the US population is roughly 22% Catholic. (57 GOP, 77 DEM)

I am the 60th Chaplain to the U.S. House of Representatives – but only the 2nd Roman Catholic. The first was my predecessor. It only took the United States House of Representatives 210 years to overcome its “Protestant nature-state” to elect a Roman Catholic to be chaplain to its disparate membership.

{ It is interesting to note that James Madison, one of the “Founding Fathers,” late in life, opined that the existence of an official Chaplain for Congress was itself unconstitutional. His language is telling: “Could a Catholic clergyman ever hope to be appointed a Chaplain? To say that his religious principles are obnoxious or that his sect is small, is to lift the evil at once and exhibit in its naked deformity the doctrine that religious truth is to be tested by numbers, or that the major sects have a right to govern the minor.” }

But the Protestant nature-state, as I just suggested, may be what makes the American experience so distinct from the European – while Europe’s democracies are developing away from a history of religiously-sponsored empires (many, for so long, Roman Catholic), the United States emerges from a relatively clean slate.

While many in the U.S. feel we are losing our bearings as “One Nation Under God,” our history is replete with multiple examples of independently-spirited people of faith – Christian Scientists and Mormons come to mind – who, like Roman Catholics, have prospered within the American constitutional system of government.

And, to its credit, or chagrin, America’s religious landscape has been richly peppered by multiple immigrations burgeoning the populations not only of Catholics and Jews, but recently Muslims, and coincidentally, non-believers variously identified as atheists, agnostics, secular humanists, or as is so commonly expressed by multitudes under the age 30, “spiritual” but not “religious” souls.

All of these, as is proper, are represented in the Peoples’ House.

So what is a Roman Catholic Chaplain to do?

First, I am a chaplain. I am not a pastor.

I am a Catholic priest -- a Jesuit. But I am not the House’s Catholic Chaplain. I do not offer Mass in the House of Representatives. There is a parish church nearby. Many Catholic Members attend Mass there.

As a priest, I do offer a Mass in my Office in the Capitol building. My daily intention is the Peoples' House. But this Mass is not publicly advertised. My Office is an American public space. I do let Catholic Members know of my Mass, but their schedules are such that it is rare for a Member to attend.

Officially, the Chaplain's Office is responsible for providing an opening prayer for each daily session of Congress. I provide this prayer (and it is one minute in length, more or less) unless a guest chaplain does so. Guest chaplains are invited by the various Members of the House.

As Chaplain to the House, my prayers are inclusive. I do not pray explicitly in the name of Jesus Christ. There are two reasons:

First, I do not wish to exclude from the House's prayer those Members who are not Christian. There are 2 Muslims, 1 Hindu, 2 Buddhists, 22 Jews and 9 non-believers currently serving. My theology of chaplaincy is this: My religious right to pray as I might is not greater than my responsibility to minister to all those whom I serve -- who have their right not to be imposed upon by my Christian preference.

That being said, however, I cannot prohibit guest chaplains from doing so, and most of the evangelical guest chaplains do pray in the name of Jesus. The pain expressed to me afterwards by the non-Christian Members is difficult for me to hear – though it usually sounds more like anger. I sympathize with them.

The second reason is that the United States is not an officially Christian nation. Officially, it is not a religious nation at all. However, it is a nation made up of religious citizens.

In addition to the one-minute opening prayer, I am called upon to say the invocation or benediction, along with the Senate Chaplain, for ceremonial events. These include the unveiling of statues honoring great Americans, celebrations honoring Americans, or world leaders for great achievement, or welcoming distinguished persons to the Capitol of the United States – Heads of State, the Dalai Lama, Aung Song Suu Kyii, Mohammed Yunis – or some day, perhaps the Pope?

But my ministry is primarily a ministry of presence. I have an office in the Capitol Building, but it is rare that a Member of Congress comes to visit. And so I make it my business to be where they are, and on a daily basis what that means is that I am

on the floor of the House during votes, when all the Members, in great chaos, are gathered.

I can see them, and they can see me.

Do they talk to me of politics or policy? Never.

Do I try to engage them on politics or policy? Never – at least I work hard not to. This struggle is mostly my own. Whenever I have strayed too close to engaging in politics, the Members themselves have stopped me.

I am valued as the one person in the entire building (almost), who is not working them one way or another politically. In other words, they are most free to be human beings, not political beings. And it is only in the deepening of those personal relationships, one by one, that I might have an impact that I might be able to identify.

One hopes that my prayers, on a daily basis, for God's gifts of wisdom, knowledge and understanding, as well as charity and mutual respect, might open the Members to God's grace for these things, but I knew early on that the cleverness of my prayers were not going to make the difference that might be needed to meet the

needs of God's people. It is God who is responsible in answering the prayers of the Chaplain.

This is good, because, as I said before, the approval rate of the House of Representatives is only 10% at best! God is better-experienced in handling rejection than I am.

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But what might I do in my ministry?

I know the names of all 435 Members. I believe the most beautiful sound in any language is one's own name. But although I am an official Officer of the U.S. House of Representatives as Chaplain, not all Members pay any attention to that, or care, while others pay great attention and do care.

There are many Catholics who feel most comfortable with my being the Chaplain; there are many who, for their own reasons, maintain a seemingly vigilant distance.

There are many non-Catholics who appreciate the "Chaplain" and thank me on a daily basis for my presence, and many others who have kept their distance for any number of reasons.

Interestingly, the non-Christians have been most appreciative, and have expressed as much, with my intention to include them – or certainly not exclude them.

It was a challenging, but for this Jesuit, humorous and enjoyable exercise to pray for the Democratic Party's Caucus gathering this past February. The Democrats, quite unlike their Republican counterparts, are comprised of Catholics, Protestants, non-Christians, non-believers, homosexuals, some of whom are married, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and smart-alecs. How does one pray for a group that includes many who do not believe in prayer?

It helps to have taken a college course in Improvisational Theater.

Every once in a while I engage in personal conversations that begin to touch upon what we here might call the "Catholic issues." I speak here in broad strokes, but generally, the Republican Party in the U.S. is the "pro-life party," while the Democratic Party is the "pro-choice party."

These labels, I would assert, are over-used and simplistic. They have rendered the important issue of abortion in American society to sound bites and visceral name-calling.

The Catholic Church, as all know, has a clear position on abortion. But how the Church has spoken on the issue may have limited how it might be addressed in order to minimize the occurrence of abortion in the United States. More on this later.

In September the Republican Party majority in the House of Representatives famously voted to cut by \$40 billion funding of the SNAP program. The American Bishops condemned this policy for its impact on poor Americans, who need the food assistance.

So while the American Bishops have been seriously critical of Democrats for their pro-choice politics, they have also been critical of the Republicans for their apparent neglect of the poor.

The peculiar situation of the Church in the United States was well-articulated recently by Bishop Kevin Farrell of Dallas, TX, who homilized at the Red Mass at St. Matthew's Cathedral in Washington, DC: "(W)e need to be reminded that we Catholics have every right to register what we believe in the public square and do it with pride and conviction. However, in a pluralistic society, we also need to be respectful of those who do not agree with or follow our teachings."

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There are two issues of great social importance to Americans, and to the Church, which I believe illustrate the American dilemma of being Catholic in a pluralistic republican form of democratically elected government. One is same-sex marriage, the other abortion.

Same sex marriage

The United States of America is a religious culture shaped by Protestantism and pragmatism. Americans, Catholic or otherwise, are not socialized within a Catholic milieu. As John Courtney Murray observed 50 years ago, the language of natural law as articulated by Aquinas and which has formed Catholic thought for centuries, is not a language intelligible to Americans.

This is evident, I believe, in the American bewilderment on the issue of contraception, and was illustrated a year ago when 8 American states endorsed same-sex marriage despite very public opposition from the Catholic bishops. I would assert that the arguments offered were simply not persuasive with the American voting public. On one level, perhaps among older Americans, the issue is viewed in terms of personal freedoms and equal rights.

But speaking as a priest who has sat with groups of young people aged 14-22 encountering their thoughts, dreams and deepest desires for 20 years of high school and university retreat work, I can say that perhaps their greatest hurdle to embracing the faith of their parents and their Catholic educators is the perceived judgment of the Church that their homosexual friends are not permitted to express their love as naturally as heterosexuals can. To them, this is unfair.

What has happened in the last decade has been the factual “liberation” of homosexuals. More and more Americans have become friends with, or discovered themselves related to, homosexuals. And homosexuals have not proven to be the destructive agents of human society they might previously have been thought to be.

To the pragmatic American listener, who does not profess the Catholic articulation of what marriage is, neither could it be persuasively argued that gay marriage might cause the breakdown of the institution of marriage. “Traditional marriages” in the U.S. are ending in divorce at a rate of 50%. This was true before anyone was talking about same-sex marriage.

That is the experiential background. So, in terms of personal freedoms and equal rights for individuals in the United States, the line of reasoning is this:

In the United States, every state has laws that have advanced the legal rights of persons getting married and raising families. There are a number of state-supported benefits: tax benefits, personal decision benefits, inheritance benefits, etc. Over the years such laws have been found to be good social policy protecting men, women and children.

De facto, homosexual couples, living the parallel lives of heterosexual couples from a secular point of view, were being denied a Constitutionally recognized right – to equal protection of the law – because of their sexual orientation. And, as we know, the American Bishops acknowledged in “Always Our Children” that “sexual orientation (heterosexual or homosexual) (is) a deep-seated dimension of one’s personality and . . . its relative stability in a person” should be recognized.

This need not be considered as disastrous as it might sound. That the government has an obligation and a right to provide for the social well-being of all its citizens by providing legal

protections and ways to solve contentious issues is a principle the Church has already learned to live with in the United States.

The laws around divorce in the States are arguably analogous to the changes being made in law for gays and lesbians. The Catholic Church is still opposed to divorce, but for those who can no longer live as married couples we see the wisdom of the state providing structures that protect their partners, their offspring and the assets earned during the time of marriage, etc.

Being myself the child of divorce living in the home of his mother, I would observe that social policies concerning marriage and divorce, and the protection of children especially, have become more prolific during the years women were becoming more and more involved in the legal and cultural arenas of American life.

Perhaps the changes being recognized by Americans concerning same-sex marriage are a pragmatic response in social policy to an emerging reality in the United States.

None of this suggests that the Church must change its teaching on sacramental marriage. The Church's teaching on marriage within the Church remains Constitutionally protected.

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Abortion

The Church's moral position on abortion is clear, and correct. Human life is, tragically, involved. The Supreme Court of the United States, in the 1973 case *Roe v. Wade*, determined that a woman has a Constitutional right to choose abortion. While there continues a cultural battle concerning abortion in the United States, it appears the issue is settled legally and constitutionally.

Until now, the Catholic position is that, given the immorality of abortion, its absolute prohibition is the only acceptable political position. If this remains the sole determinant of how a Catholic politician must engage this issue in the American political process, the Catholic voice and influence in social policy *vis a vis* the issue of abortion in the United States may be minimal.

Again, I am not dismissing the moral position. Like it or not, until now in the United States the Constitutional issue trumps the Catholic position. So politically, how might Catholic politicians be encouraged to work toward social policy that minimizes the occurrence of abortion? What if instead of working to eliminate a

woman's choice, Catholic politicians were encouraged to work toward empowering a woman to make the choice for life?

This would suggest a shift in focus: the health and wellbeing of women must be first and foremost in the battle for the life of the unborn child. It appears to me that in the American debate, with the focus placed on the life of the unborn, the Church is not seen as a leading voice in this regard.

I am not suggesting that the Church's pastoral and charitable commitment to women is not real at the local level. Nor that Catholic hospitals are not an extraordinary presence of our Church in the U.S. These are real, but the good news of the Gospel they proclaim is lost in the language of pro-life and pro-choice, and the Church's position against abortion is the only Catholic position Americans are aware of.

But neither is this just a marketing problem. The serious issues of protecting life, and caring for women so that they might freely choose life, cannot be addressed by charity alone. They demand social policy choices, policies that guarantee women the medical care they need to carry their children to term, raise them with enough food and medical care, along with their siblings, to be

healthy members of society, and childcare so that women and their husbands might be able to find jobs with living wages.

In *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II recognized, I believe, the complexity of the political reality:

“(T)here are all kinds of existential and interpersonal difficulties, made worse by the complexity of a society in which individuals, couples, and families are often left alone with their problems. There are situations of acute poverty, anxiety, or frustration in which the struggle to make ends meet, the presence of unbearable pain, or instances of violence, especially against women, make the choice to defend and promote life so demanding as sometimes to reach the point of heroism.” *EV 11, (1995)*

I understand that, philosophically, a shift from abolishing abortion to limiting its practice suggests an abandonment of the moral principle. But in the context of the American political reality, such a commitment would truly challenge the American political discourse in a new way – a way that would be notably prophetic, because it demands of the American people that any claimed allegiance to a culture of life is something worth paying for –

indeed, not something worth paying for, but something that our moral principles demand we pay for.

But, as I mentioned, within the American context, the political complexity of all this is why a chaplain's thoughts are no proscriptive, nor quite frankly relevant. My thoughts here are intended for the consideration of our Church.

Might our Catholic politicians be encouraged to work together to find other ways to limit abortion in the United States? They cannot do so now, without suffering public attack questioning the authenticity of their Catholic identity.

As the history of the United States has shown, living in the Land of the Free and Home of the Brave with its Constitutionally guaranteed freedoms, has allowed a flourishing of the faith in America. But it also challenges the Church to cease being self-referential in the natural law language it uses in conversing with the American public.