

Reflections

Lawrence P. Grayson

The Way Back

(Fourth of a series of four articles)

For nearly two hundred years from its founding, America could be considered a Christian society. Although church and state were separate, the public life of the nation was conducted in conformity with Christian principles: God was welcome in the public venue; actions of political and business leaders were guided by a common sense of virtue and morality that formed the ethos of the general public; churches were free to conduct their social and charitable works according to the norms of their religion.

Then, beginning in the 1960s and continuing to the present, there has been a continual movement to treat religion as a solely private matter, to remove all reference to God from public affairs, to impose militantly secular norms on religiously-based organizations and activities. What Justice Potter Stewart, who cast the only dissenting vote when the Supreme Court ruled in 1963 that reading Bible passages or reciting the Lord's Prayer in school was unconstitutional – practices that had been common since public education was begun -- said is coming to pass: the decision would lead to the "establishment of a religion of secularism."

These changes have occurred because Christians have not resisted them. They have accepted a total separation of religious beliefs from the life of the world. Limiting devotions to Sundays, they have adopted an exclusively secular way of thinking and living the rest of the week. At best, they have tried to adapt religious principles to the changing society, while ignoring the role that Christianity can play in shaping that society. America, following the lead of Europe, is developing a culture that excludes God from public awareness, thus eroding the nation's spiritual foundations. As then-Cardinal Ratzinger has warned: "The attempt to shape human affairs to the total exclusion of God leads us more and more to the brink of the abyss, toward the utter annihilation of man."

The nation's need is for a public morality capable of counteracting the advocacy of people who consider God irrelevant. America must revitalize its Christian heritage. The road back is not a return to the past, but to the development of a doctrine of the modern world based on Christian principles and an ordering of our national life with it. It is an attempt to generate from the central teachings and insights of our Faith the spiritual energy to re-root Christian tenets into the life of the nation.

The path will not be easy. To change society is a daunting task. The difficulty of leading a Christian life in a militantly secular society is compounded by our involvement in a network of institutions and relationships from which we cannot disassociate ourselves: our businesses, schools, associates, neighbors, the media, advertisements, recreational venues -- influences that in many cases are not neutral, but anti-Christian. Far-reaching changes are called for in the institutions, laws, practices and activities of

existing society. It will take a stupendous effort to bring about the spiritual and moral revitalization needed to order the collective temperament of the nation in accordance with a Christian understanding of life. If it is not done, however, our Faith, as well as that of our children and their descendents, will be at risk.

As a start, a program of education and spiritual formation is needed. It can no longer be assumed that Christians, including Catholics, have an adequate knowledge of their Faith, of why they were born, and toward what end they are destined. Catholics, as well as all Christians, must develop a deeper understanding of the purpose of their existence and make that a basis for their lives. The education, beginning in the parishes and continuing through organizations such as the Knights of Columbus, must be directed toward developing a Catholic philosophy of life, based on the unchanging tenets of the Faith, to instill values that will help the individual act in a Catholic manner in the world-at-large. The aim is to have the person's religious and social behavior united, so that one's religious beliefs guide one's actions in social life, business dealings, and pleasurable activities.

Catholics, and Christians generally, have operated in a reactive mode to the transformation of society. Those advocating secularism have advanced their cause a step at a time, law suit after law suit, challenge after challenge, change after change. Now it is time for Catholics to take a more proactive stance, and what organization is better suited to do this than the Knights of Columbus, acting in concert with our Bishops and Priests.

The Knights of Columbus is already playing a role in this effort with its consistent stand on pro-life issues, its support to keep the mention of God in the Pledge of Allegiance, and its growing willingness to speak out on political issues that have moral aspects that are in opposition to Catholic teaching. But, much more must be done. Imagine the effect on the nation if one million Catholic men and their families took a stand for decency – pledged not watch videos that were indecent; did not patronize businesses that supported immoral life styles; said Grace before meals when in public restaurants; wrote their Congressmen about legislation that had moral implications (good as well as bad); complained to corporate sponsors about their sexually-suggestive advertising; said the Rosary as a family each day. The shift toward secularism has been many decades in the making, and it will take an extended period to fully reverse the trend. As Knights, we can begin with prayer, continue with educating our members about the problems and what can be done, and then help develop public awareness and stimulate public action to restore religion to its proper place in American democracy. Although the task is Herculean, we are not alone – God is on our side. Remember, *Vivat Jesus!*

* * * * *

Published June 2007

