

The Honorable William Barr
Remarks on Acceptance of Christifideles Laici Award
National Catholic Prayer Breakfast
September 23, 2020

Good morning. Thank you, Leonard. It is a great honor to be recognized by this esteemed organization. The truth is that no one is really worth of an award like this, so I am a little sheepish in accepting it. But I am honored to do so, because I greatly admire the organizers of this breakfast and those who are associated with it. This is a beautiful piece of artwork that I will cherish. Thank you.

For more than 15 years now, inspired by Saint John Paul II's call for a renewal of Catholic communal and civic spirit, the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast has served as a living testament to the vital role of the Church and its principles in American public life. Thank you for praying with me, and for me, and for the future of our country.

This is a challenging time for many Americans. But times of trial have a way of reminding us how much we have to be grateful for. As people of faith, we take comfort in the knowledge that God has a purpose and a plan. And as citizens, we gain strength from the knowledge that our forebears confronted and overcame even greater tests.

In joining together to pray for the strength and health of our country, we carry on a tradition that goes back to the beginning of the Republic. During the summer of 1783, General George Washington gave his first major address following the Revolutionary War—a war the young Nation very nearly lost. He delivered a famous prayer that continues to be read aloud every day at Mount Vernon. He asked God not only to protect the Nation from external threats, but to maintain the character of its citizens: as he put it, to “dispose us all to do justice, to love mercy,” and to comport ourselves “with that charity, humility and pacific temper of mind, which were the characteristics of the divine author of our blessed religion,” and without which “we can never hope to be a happy Nation.”

As Washington and his fellow Founders understood, religion is at the heart of the American experiment in self-government. In his Farewell Address, Washington said: “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.”

What he meant is that self-government begins with self-restraint. And there is no greater teacher of restraint than religion. That is why John Adams declared that our Constitution—which recently celebrated its 233rd birthday—“was made only for a moral and religious people.” As Father John Courtney Murray later put it, the American idea is not that “free government is inevitable, only that it is possible, and that its possibility can be realized only when the people as a whole are inwardly governed by the recognized imperatives of the universal moral order.”

That crucial link between religion and liberty, so well understood at the Founding, is all too often forgotten today. In American public discourse, perhaps no concept is more misunderstood than the notion of “separation of church and state.” Militant secularists have long seized on that

slogan as a facile justification for attempting to drive religion from the public square and to exclude religious people from bringing a religious perspective to bear on conversations about the common good.

Yet as events like this one remind us, separation of church and state does not mean, and never did mean, separation of religion and civics. As late as 1952, Justice William O. Douglas could write for a majority of the Supreme Court that “we are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being.” Alexis de Tocqueville, the keenest observer of the early American republic, praised America’s separation of church and state while extolling America’s union of the “spirit of religion” and the “spirit of liberty” as the key to its success. And Tocqueville identified religion as perhaps the greatest bulwark against a descent into tyranny.

How does religion preserve liberty? In the first place, as our Founders recognized, religion assists in the formation of virtuous citizens who are prepared to exercise liberty responsibly. Whereas in democratic times, individuals have a tendency to withdraw from public life and pursue private self-gratification, religion builds community, strengthens social cohesion, and turns our attention to the common good. At the same time, religion safeguards individual rights by warding off what Tocqueville called the “impious maxim” that “everything is permitted in the interest of society.” For all of these reasons, Tocqueville referred to Americans’ religion as “the first of their political institutions.”

Unfortunately, in the last half century, that foundation of our free society has increasingly been under siege. Traditional morality has eroded, and secularists have often succeeded not only in eliminating religion from schools and the public square, but in replacing it with new orthodoxies that are actively hostile to religion. The consequences of this hollowing out of religion have been predictably dire. Over the past fifty years, we have seen striking increases in urban violence, drug abuse, and broken families. Problems like these have fed the rise of an ever more powerful central government, one that increasingly saps individual initiative, coopts civil society, crowds out religious institutions, and ultimately reduces citizens to wards of the State.

As patriotic Americans and people of faith, we cannot be complacent about these trends. Yet nor should we give in to despair. More recently, thanks in part to organizations like this one, we have seen some small but significant steps toward the restoration of religion to its rightful place in American public life.

Some notable advances—which admittedly are of particular interest to me—have come in the legal arena. They are the result of decades of hard work advocating for sound jurisprudential philosophies and appointing principled judges to state and federal courts. The most recent term of the Supreme Court, for example, saw three important victories for religious liberty. In each of these cases, the Department of Justice filed briefs supporting the free exercise of religion.

In one case, the Court reaffirmed the principle that the government cannot discriminate against religion in general funding programs, and struck down a provision of the Montana Constitution that had been interpreted to exclude religious schools from a scholarship program for underprivileged students. In another case, the Court held that the First Amendment prohibits courts from intervening in employment disputes involving teachers at religious schools who are

entrusted with the responsibility of instructing their students in the faith. In the third case, the Court considered a regulatory mandate requiring employers to provide contraceptive coverage to their employees, and upheld the Administration's rules exempting the nuns of the Little Sisters of the Poor and other employers with moral and religious objections.

In a sense, it is dispiriting that the disputes in these cases ever arose. In each case, the religious litigants were not asking for anything more than the basic freedom to exercise their faith and be treated the same as others. Nevertheless, the recognition of those rights by courts is encouraging. And all involved—from the litigants and lawyers to those who prayed for the wisdom of judges—can take solace in having achieved a just result.

Advocating for religious liberty is just one way that lay Catholics and others can answer the call to serve. In his exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, for which the award I have the honor of accepting today is named, Saint John Paul II noted that “the lay faithful are never to relinquish their participation in ‘public life’.” At the same time, he emphasized that faith is first and foremost about how we live our daily lives, for “the daily life itself of a truly Christian family makes up the first ‘experience of Church.’”

Wherever we are in life, it is never too late to work in the Lord's vineyard. Our spiritual renewal, and the renewal of our national character, depend on it. God bless you all, and God Bless America.