

**Speaker Paul Ryan – National Catholic Prayer Breakfast  
May 17, 2016**

*Following are Speaker Ryan's full remarks, as prepared for delivery:*

“Thank you, Carl, for the introduction. I want to thank the board of directors for organizing this event. I also want to commend my fellow speakers: Sister Constance, it is a pleasure to see you again. In January, I invited her and another sister from their order to attend the president's last State of the Union address. We had a great time. And Cardinal Sarah, it is an honor to meet you.

“So, when I started preparing my remarks, I had an idea. What if I gave an extended meditation on Thomas Aquinas's commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard?

“Well, my staff didn't like that idea. One of them said to me, ‘Heavy stuff for the 7 a.m. prayer breakfast over bacon and eggs.’

“I said to them, ‘I guess you're right’ . . . went home . . . thought it over.

“And then I proceeded . . . to completely ignore their advice.

“So Aquinas it is. But, if you will forgive the pun, I will try to put it in layman's terms.

“Aquinas once wrote, ‘It should be known that all right-thinking men’ — clearly, he never ran for office — ‘make contemplation of God the end of human life’ — that is, the purpose of human life.

“In other words, our purpose is to know God, period — whatever your circumstances in life — rich or poor, strong or weak, famous or obscure. It is not that faith inspires you to work hard or raise a family or achieve your goals — though it very well might. Instead, faith is its own reward.

“The reason I bring this up is, these days religious liberty is under assault. A lot of people think faith is just an odd, colorful mask for the ugly face of intolerance. I am not saying we should feel put upon. I mean, saints were thrown to the lions. By that standard, we have it easy. What I am saying is, we have to advocate for our faith. And we should defend religious liberty not just on material grounds — that is, because people of faith do good things, like give to charity or volunteer. We should also defend it on spiritual grounds — that is, because living out our faith gives us joy.

“What people of faith understand is there is more to life than what we can see and hear. And there is nothing more life-changing than coming to know the Lord. Once you realize that there is a God . . . and He is good . . . and He loves you — not just humanity at large, but you the person — you realize that you are not alone. You are not just a body. You are body and soul. And life is not just a tale ‘full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.’ Life is full of meaning. That is why prayer is so important. It is the hotline to heaven. And that is why we object when government restricts religious liberty: When faith is ruled out of bounds, then happiness itself is put out of reach.

“If you need an example, look no further than the Little Sisters of the Poor. I think we can all agree they are doing some of the noblest work out there. And yet the administration has been trying to force them to offer benefits that violate their beliefs. The sisters have tried to negotiate with the administration, and frankly its response has shown a total misunderstanding of faith.

“On their website, the sisters have a cartoon strip that illustrates the disagreement perfectly. A sister and a bureaucrat are debating the issue. The bureaucrat says, ‘You offer the stuff you object to in your plan and we’ll pay for it.’

“The sister replies, ‘Our concern isn’t the cost but the morality.’

“The bureaucrat says, ‘No, we’re offering to pay for it, so your conscience is clear.’

“The sister responds—in big, bold letters—‘That’s not the way it works.’ They should not have to participate in any way—even if it seems like a formality. But that’s the problem: The administration seems to believe only in a material world, where the only stuff that matters is dollars and cents. But that’s a cold, unfeeling world to live in. And that’s not the kind of country that our Constitution envisions.

“That’s why I joined a friend of the court brief on behalf of the sisters’ lawsuit against the federal government. Thankfully, we got some good news from the Supreme Court yesterday, when it sent the case back to the lower courts. Clearly, the Court does not believe that the government has done a good enough job protecting religious liberty. And that’s why I’m calling on the administration to eliminate this burden once and for all.

“This seems so obvious to all of us that you might start to get discouraged. Why is this even an issue? But I actually think religious liberty is going to make a comeback—because there is a growing need for faith. Let me give you one example. Today, all across America, there is an opioid epidemic. And over the past four years, I’ve met with a lot of people struggling with addiction. Not everyone is the same, but what a lot of them will tell you is, they feel a deep, gnawing pain inside. And the reason they turn to drugs is to escape it. Eventually, they realize the only way to escape the pain is to turn to God. So when I see people struggling with addiction, do they need the best medical care? Absolutely, yes. But a lot of them need something more.

“For a lot of them, that pain stems from loneliness—a feeling that no one loves them—that they don’t matter. And it wasn’t until I met them face to face that I realized we all feel that loneliness at some level. We all feel that distance from God. What is sin but a turning away from Him? We sometimes forget this because we’re more comfortable. When you have a good-paying job or a happy family, it is tempting to think, ‘I don’t do drugs. I don’t commit crimes. I don’t have it as bad as other people. I’m a good person.’

“That, of course, is the exact wrong way to think. It is the sin of pride. It reminds me of *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis. I kept a copy of it in my briefcase for years. Uncle Screwtape, a demon, is teaching a young devil how to turn a man to sin. At one point Screwtape says, ‘Catch him at the moment when he is really poor in spirit and smuggle into his mind the gratifying reflection, ‘By jove! I’m being humble.’” If you ask me, Screwtape could have been a great

political consultant. The point is, I believe it was my faith that brought me to this realization: We all are sinners. We all need God. So it is not enough to create more jobs or raise people's wages—though we should do that too. There is a spiritual void that we need to fill. Perhaps poverty is God's way of leading us to contemplate something higher. The way I see it, the fight against poverty and the need for religious liberty go hand in hand.

"I'll close with this: When you meet people who have beaten addiction, most of them say, 'It wasn't me, it was God.' They know the true source of their success. In their struggles, they have to come know Him—and find happiness. And now we've come full circle. Every good work is the work of God. It is His grace working inside us. And when you realize that, you not only lose your pride, you lose any sense of despair. That's the meaning of true happiness—at least in this world. It is not a cheap thrill or temporary exuberance: It is a deep, abiding inner peace.

"And what gives us that peace is coming to know God. That's what I think Aquinas was saying.

"See? That wasn't so bad.

"My friends, it is an honor to break bread with you and to pray with you. Please pray for me and all our elected officials that we may be instruments of God's will. Thank you very much."