Wanted: Liberty and Religion in the Public Square

Is faith, in particular a faith linked to Catholic identity, and service to the poor mutually exclusive? Today, it seems that we are compelled to choose between the two. This choice is an artificial one. Consider the principles upon which this country was founded and the concomitant history of Catholic social services.

“America’s Founders upheld religion the same way they would uphold religion and morality. The Founders did not approve of a national church; however, they valued government encouragement and support of religion in public laws. In rebuilding a society, religion must return along with faith based institutions to the central role in public life.”

A century later, America’s icon of freedom, “Liberty Enlightening the World,” publicly married freedom with responsibility, a call to welcome and to care for the “tired” and the “poor.” Christian beliefs enabled people of faith to give of themselves. Religious leaders resolute in building faith-filled communities served those in need----building up the community. An illustration of this work is found in the first Roman Catholic Nuns in America---the Ursuline Nuns.

In 1726, King Louis XV of France sent three Ursuline nuns to help educate young women and minister to the sick in New Orleans. After several months of traveling, they arrived in 1727. The nuns of this time believed education was necessary for young girls and women. “The development of a civilized society was a just society.” They founded the first Ursuline Academy in 1727, educating young Hispanic women and women of wealthy families. It still stands as the oldest Catholic girls’ school in the United States. The academy’s mission is dedicated to the moral, spiritual, and intellectual growth of all the young women who attend.

During the early 1800s, the nuns advocated for their religious freedom and right to be free from interference of civil authorities while providing Christian services to the community.

On July13, 1804, then President Thomas Jefferson wrote to, “the Soeur Therese de St. Xavier Farjon Superior, and the Nuns of the order of St. Ursula at New Orleans.” I have received, holy sisters, the letter you have written me wherein you express anxiety for the property vested in your institution by the former governments of Louisiana. The principles of the constitution and government of the United States are a sure guarantee to you that it will be preserved to you sacred and inviolate, and that your institution will be permitted to govern itself according to its own voluntary rules, without interference from the civil authority. Whatever diversity of shade may appear in the religious opinions of our fellow citizens, the charitable objects of your institution cannot be indifferent to any; and its furtherance of the wholesome purposes of society, by training up its younger members in the way they should go, cannot fail to ensure it the patronage of the government it is under. Be assured it will meet with all the protection which my office can give it. I salute you, holy sisters, with friendship and respect.” Thomas Jefferson
The nuns continued to minister the corporal works of mercy by opening their doors during the War of 1812 to provide respite and care for the wounded soldiers. In addition, their religious convictions lead them to continue providing vital social services to the community by establishing an orphanage and hospital for New Orleans. The hospital services continue to be a vibrant part of the local community today.

Today, the Catholic Church continues to tend to the needs of the poor. Inclusive of all its ministries, the laity performs the corporal works of mercy in many dioceses across the nation. The Church’s social services strive to embrace all those who are weak, vulnerable and most in need. Catholic health care organizations compromise the largest non-profit in the United States, representing hospitals and nursing homes in all 50 states. Catholic Charities USA has grown into one of the largest social service organizations in the nation, with branches throughout the United States.

*Catholic social teaching* instructs ministries and agencies to protect the weak and vulnerable, leading each individual to Christ. In the present-day cultural and political climate, this mission is challenging, considering the intrusive influence of the government, as it continues to restrict the free exercise of morals and values in religious-based institutions—by virtue of laws, regulations, contracts, and policies. The Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humane*, addresses the right of the person and communities to social and civil freedom in religious matters. Catholic institutions should be free to serve the common good and take part in proclaiming the gospel.

The Church’s challenge is to preserve the Catholic identity in a secularist society. Many threats permeate the landscape. Recent examples of these threats include the Little Sisters of the Poor and HHS contraception mandate; tax-exempt status of religious institutions threatened for following church teaching on marriage; and the right of religious adoption agencies to decline to place children with same-sex couples, which has forced several of these agencies to close. The current Administration continues to hold the doctrinal teachings of the Church hostage. The demands—comply, pay fines, violate your morals, values and religious beliefs---contrast dramatically with President Jefferson’s policy of support for and protection of the work of the Ursuline Nuns.

The reality is that Catholic institutions cannot violate Church teaching, and only provide for the poor. The Supreme Court case involving the Little Sisters of the Poor demonstrated that in March. Furthermore, as a religious community, we cannot choose serving the poor over morality. These principles cannot be severed from one another. Both are fundamental to the sacred teachings of the Catholic Church, our religious principles and basic values in continuing to build up society and our culture.

Ronald Reagan once said, “to those who cite the first amendment as reason for excluding God from more and more of our institutions and everyday life, may I just say: The first amendment
of the Constitution was not written to protect the people of this country from religious values; it was written to protect religious values from government tyranny.”

We must find alternative solutions to these problems, and the Catholic faithful need to wake up!

In *Dignitatis Humane*Ⅲ, the Vatican Council declared, “We are bound to seek the truth, especially in matters concerning the Church. As followers of Jesus Christ, we need to support the principle of religious freedom. These freedoms continue to be the most pressing concerns for the Church and society. We along with Church should claim these freedoms in accordance of the Christian faith.” We must demand religion and Christian principles return to their rightful place in the public square and society—as faithful witnesses to the truth.

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i Spalding, Matthew. The Heritage Foundation the Meaning of Religious Liberty, PhD., No. 1722 12/5/07
ii The New Colossus, Emma Lazarus
iii Ursuline Academy, www.uanola.org (retrieved 3-18-16)