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Symposium

Can the Seamless Garment Be Sewn?
The Future of Pro-Life Progressivism

Faith and Values in the Public Arena: An American Catholic in Public Life

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Fides et Iustitia

CLOSING ADDRESS

FAITH AND VALUES IN THE PUBLIC ARENA: AN AMERICAN CATHOLIC IN PUBLIC LIFE

JAMES L. OBERSTAR, M.C.*

The test of a Catholic in the public arena—by which I mean elective office—is to preserve one's moral integrity and be true to one's conscience.

Toward that end, I have been guided by my upbringing in an iron ore miner's family in northern Minnesota, my undergraduate formation here at the College of St. Thomas, the works of John Courtney Murray, and the inspiration of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin.

David Hollenbeck, S.J., described the Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray as "the preeminent practitioner of public theology and public moral discourse in the whole history of American Catholicism." Father Murray said that we are called to base our political views on our "particular understanding of the human person and the common good." As a compelling advocate of genuine dialogue and respectful public discourse on common issues in our pluralistic society, he attempted to enlighten the public on the moral rationale underlying proposed legislation. He wanted us to speak, but also to listen—qualities we need more of today.

Cardinal Bernardin, in what he elegantly called the "seamless garment of life," argued that it is not sufficient to be opposed to abortion: we must also support pre- and post-natal care of mother and child; we must advocate for education, health care, jobs with a livable wage, housing and food for the needy; oppose the death penalty; and resist unjust war.

Let me give a particular example: Jeb Magruder, a Watergate "plumber," in his book, *An American Life*, wrote:

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* Born in Chisholm, Minnesota, Jim Oberstar graduated *summa cum laude* from the College of St. Thomas in 1956, with majors in French and Political Science. Currently in his sixteenth term, Congressman Oberstar is the longest-serving member of the House of Representatives from the State of Minnesota. He is the senior Democrat on the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure. Congressman Oberstar presented these remarks at the *University of St. Thomas Law Journal*'s symposium, "Can the Seamless Garment Be Sewn? The Future of Pro-Life Progressivism," Minneapolis, Minn., Mar. 11, 2005.

> No one forced me or the others to break the law. Instead . . . we ignored our better judgment out of a combination of ambition, loyalty, and partisan passion.
>
> If we consider how many people broke the law in the Watergate Affair, men who were usually model citizens in their private lives, we must ask if our failures do not somehow reflect larger failures in the values of our society.
>
> I, and many members of my generation, placed far too much emphasis on our personal ambitions, on achieving success as measured in materialistic terms, and far too little emphasis on moral and humanistic values.
>
> We had private morality, but not a sense of public morality.

That quality of "public morality" is uniquely tested where I work in our nation's capitol. There are few environments as pressure-filled and laden with temptation as the Washington scene, whether in the public arena, the private sector, or in academia. This place seethes with the beckoning finger of ambition; it values a beating-the-competition-at-all-costs kind of success, in Nuremberg-style amorality.

I believe we have to start each day with the question, "How will my faith influence my decision making today?" And end the day with, "How did my faith influence my decision making today?"

How many of my actions, day by day, does my faith inform? Do I do the right thing when I am under great pressure, or when I am in a threatening environment, regardless of the group's approval or disapproval?

When we arrive at our workplace, neither Christ nor the Holy Spirit meets us at the door to guide us through the day. We have to rely on our personal moral foundation, as informed by faith and the scriptures, in order to extend Sunday into the week; to discern the relationship between our human purpose and God's purpose; and to discern the relationship between the scriptures, the life we lead, and the work we perform.

Each of us, surely, can think of some difficult moral decision we've made; I'll share with you one of mine:

In 1984 I was caught up in an intense campaign for the endorsement of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party to be its candidate for the United States Senate. A vital factor in winning the party's endorsement was support from the DFL's major pro-choice group, with whom I engaged in an extensive three and one half-hour dialogue, two-thirds of which was on abortion.

Toward the end of the meeting, one of the leaders said, "You are so right on all the social and economic issues, the international issues such as human rights, nuclear war, etc. We could support you if you would make the commitment not to speak out on this issue of abortion."

The words of Mathew's Gospel rang in my heart: "The devil took him up to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world,

promising, 'All these will I bestow on you if you prostrate yourself in homage before me.'" Jesus said, "Away with you, Satan."

I didn't quite put it that way, but I did say, "That, I cannot and will not do" and effectively abandoned a career in the U.S. Senate.

The French theologian, Louis Evely, wrote that prayer "is not us speaking to God, but listening to Him talking to you." Evely's central thought was that it is God who prays, or speaks, to us and mankind who does not heed His prayers.

In that spirit, our examination of conscience should be: Do I conduct my life so that the people I meet see our Father in me, or do they simply see my day-to-day face? Do I have enough faith to see God hidden in my neighbor, waiting to be loved in a special way?

Public office is essentially service to our fellow human beings. The Greeks called politics service to the *polis*. In my view, it requires, as does prayer, emptying ourselves of ourselves so that we can be totally open to the needs and call of others who cannot do so well for themselves. Christ, in the Gospels, is asking us to break into other people's lives, to busy ourselves with their needs—something my late wife, Jo, and our children and I did regularly, cooking gallons of spaghetti and sauce to be served at the Washington inner-city kitchens of So Others Might Eat (SOME).

In the Gospels, the condemned are accused not so much of violating the commandments as of failing to address themselves to those in this world living in misery. They are condemned less for what they have done than, as we say at Mass, for what they have failed to do.

In the mid-1980s, the Reagan White House set forth successive budgets of program cuts for the poor and tax cuts for corporations and wealthy individuals under the slogan "Private economic initiative is the source of wealth in our country."

The Catholic bishops countered with a pastoral entitled "Economic Justice for All." "The Christian ethic," they wrote, "is incompatible with the primary or exclusionary focus on maximization of profit. That so many people are poor in a nation as rich as ours is a social and moral scandal that we cannot ignore."

"Private charity and voluntary action are not sufficient to alleviate poverty." The federal government, the bishops continued, should sponsor "direct job creation programs, provide more support for economic planning, and cut military spending."

"People of all faith," they continued, "must measure their actions and be judged in the light of what they do for the poor, what they do to the poor, and what they enable the poor to do for themselves." These are the same bishops, by the way, who call for an end to abortion and are roundly criticized for it.

I served on the Budget Committee in those days when we grappled with mountainous deficits and Hobson's choices in cutting spending in order to reduce the deficit. I often reminded my committee colleagues of the words of Proverbs 22:13: "He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor will, himself, also call and not be heard."

Read Leviticus 23:22: "When you reap the harvest of your field, you shall not be so thorough that you reap the field to its very edge, nor shall you glean the stray ears of your grain. These things you shall leave for the poor and the alien. I, the Lord, am your God."

If you are looking for a moral underpinning for public policy, you can find Food for Peace in those words, as well as the school lunch program, Meals on Wheels, congregate care.

Or if you look to Leviticus 25:25: "When your countryman becomes so impoverished beside you that he sells you his services, do not make him work as a slave."

Again, I think you can discern in those words the moral underpinnings of a minimum wage law.

When Pope John Paul II appealed to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the G-8 nations to forgive a large portion of third world debt, it was not a mere humanitarian gesture, it was a call based upon and inspired by Isaiah's decree of a Jubilee Year, an injunction to the Israelites to "let the fields lie fallow, arid forgive debts"—a moral imperative from the words of eternity.

In all that I undertake in public life, I am guided by the firm belief that, at the end of life, we will be judged, not by the volume of grain in our bins, not the size of our budget surplus, nor the might of our armies.

We will be judged by:
I was hungry and you gave me food.
I was thirsty and you gave me drink.
I was a stranger and you made me welcome.
I was naked and you clothed me.

When we nourish the human spirit, take in the dispossessed, shelter them with love, and clothe the naked with human dignity, we are surely doing the Lord's work on Earth in our daily lives, in our service of the *polis*.