

MARY ANN GLENDON ON CHRISTIAN WITNESS IN AMERICA

Text of Her Address at Congress of Catholic Laity

ROME, NOV. 27, 2000 (ZENIT.org).- Here is the text of an address by Mary Ann Glendon of Harvard Law School at the Congress of Catholic Laity. She spoke at a round table Saturday.

Challenges of the Christian Witness in America

I have been asked to offer some comments regarding the Challenges to Christian Witness in North America, with particular reference to the role of the United States in the ambiguous process known as globalization, globalization of culture and globalization of the economy. And to do so in 15 minutes!

Fortunately, the recent Synod on the Church in America provides us with a concise starting point for reflection: The main challenge to the Christian witness in America is a set of habits and beliefs that are so deeply entrenched that they amount to a "culture." The Holy Father calls it "the culture of death" and warns us that it is spreading with alarming speed. Indeed, it seems to be borne along on the currents of the phenomena known as globalization.

The main elements of the culture of death are easy to enumerate (materialism, consumerism, secularism, relativism and hyper-individualism), but if one is actually immersed in such a culture, it's not always easy to recognize the forms they assume. Often it is the poet or the novelist who sees more deeply than the rest of us and who is thus able to hold up a mirror showing the true face of our society, as Charles Dickens did in 19th-century England.

Last year, the American author Tom Wolfe offered us a disconcerting portrait of the United States in his best-selling novel, "A Man in Full." Late 20th-century America, as Wolfe depicts it, has some uncomfortable similarities to Rome in the time of empire. The old Republic of our ancestors is fading from memory; its democratic elements are diminishing; we now have a polity that is more like an oligarchy than a republic. To be sure, this new polity has its excitement and attractions: There is far more wealth and social mobility than in the Republic. And there is far more personal liberty, if you're not fussy about the distinction between liberty and license! Manners are relaxed; behavior formerly frowned upon is now tolerated, marriage is easily terminated. Games and spectacles abound.

Wolfe shows us a society that has become unusually careless about its "moral ecology" -- the moral foundations upon which both a free market and a free polity depend. The fabric of customs that once helped to civilize the relations

between men and women is frayed, and motherhood receives little support or respect. Children spend more waking hours with the TV, the Internet, and in government-run schools than with their mothers and fathers. Technology has, so to speak, democratized the vices, in the sense that forms of self-indulgence once known only to emperors are now available to persons of modest means.

This prosperous, permissive society is thus a new kind of mission territory, but quite different in one important respect from the pagan lands that Christians evangelized in former times. Paganism at least had the virtue that it was open to mystery and transcendence! But in the affluent countries of North America, paganism and Christianity alike are increasingly being displaced by an arid secularism, materialism and nihilism. And a society that has banished transcendence, we are beginning to realize, can be a pretty frightening place.

The bleakness of that picture, however, is relieved by the continuing presence of unusual opportunities for Christian witness. The United States still has a much larger proportion of regular churchgoers than any other country in the world. And the endless opinion polling that took place prior to the recent election revealed that the majority of voters consider the most important issues facing the country to be moral issues and that they perceive the country in a moral decline. But the same polls also show a great reluctance to embody moral positions in public policy. That strange mixture of attitudes prompted the Catholic novelist Walker Percy to begin a story this way: "Once upon a time in the latter-day, Christ-haunted, Christ-forgetting United States ..."

That disconnect between popular sentiment and public policy led secular political analyst Francis Fukuyama to contend in *The Wall Street Journal* last week that, despite their expressed concern about moral decline, "the greatest moral passion of contemporary Americans as demonstrated in their voting is hostility to 'moralism' in areas related to sex and family life."

Many religious leaders see it differently. They regard the disjunction between what Americans say they believe and what emerges from the political process as evidence of a culture war: a war of ideas between different segments of a divided society holding different values -- with secularism, materialism and individualism more pervasive among the elites than among the population at large.

There is a good deal of truth to the culture-war theory. The values of the men and women who hold key positions in governments, political parties, corporations, mass media, foundations and universities are often quite remote from the concerns of the average citizen. Strong ties to persons and places, religious beliefs, attachment to tradition and even to family life are apt to be less important to those at the top than to the men and women whose lives they affect. (And, incidentally, the elements of American culture that spread most rapidly around the world tend to be the values of these elites; they find a ready

reception within the global technocratic class whose members often have more in common with their counterparts in other countries than with their own fellow citizens.)

But the culture-war image, which is especially popular among evangelical Christians, has its limitations. Those who see society through that lens often see themselves as engaged in a struggle along the lines of the old western movies with good guys in white hats on one side and bad guys in black hats on the other. Recently, after a number of setbacks in that struggle, notably the Supreme Court's decision holding that states cannot ban partial-birth abortions, several Protestant evangelical leaders publicly declared their belief that the bad guys had won. They announced that they would no longer be active in public life; that it was time for Christians to withdraw from that corrupt sphere.

The fact is, however, that the culture war is more complicated than a fight of white hats against black hats. The fact is that most American Christians who take their missionary vocation seriously have been operating with two theories that are on a collision course: On the one hand, we keep insisting that the majority of the American people possess more good sense and common decency than comes through in media images and public policies. But for years we have maintained that the American character is being adversely affected by the abortion mentality, the divorce mentality, sexual promiscuity and indifference to the poor. Now, it stands to reason that if the second proposition is correct, it will at some point undercut the first. The balance at some point will shift in favor of the culture of death.

I do not believe, as some of the more pessimistic evangelicals do, that we have reached the point of no return. And even if I did it wouldn't matter because our duty to witness remains the same. But I do believe that if you want to be a missionary, you have to know the territory. And if you want to know the territory, you'd better remember that there's nobody here but us Americans. And no American has been untouched by the effect of living in a society where for nearly 30 years abortion on demand has taken one and a half million lives a year.

My point here is that the culture war is real, but it's not just a struggle between different groups in society; it's a war within the mind and heart of every American. The difference between what we say we believe and what we do is the same old moral impotence of which Paul wrote to the Romans: "I do not do the good I know."

The wordsmiths of the culture of death have been quick to exploit that weakness of human nature. About 30 years ago, they came up with one of the most insidious slogans ever invented: "Personally, I'm opposed to [here you may fill in the blank], but I can't impose my opinions on others." That slogan

was the moral anesthesia they offered to people who are deeply troubled about cultural decline, but who don't know quite how to express their views in public. The anesthesia worked: That's why we have these strange polling results where the same people who say they consider abortion to be an unspeakable moral crime say "yes" when they are asked whether the decision to have an abortion should be left up to the woman.

The Christian witness of countless good men and women has been silenced by that diabolically clever little phrase. Only recently have a number of Catholics, Protestants and Jews stepped forward to reclaim their right to a voice in public affairs. They point out that when we advance our religiously grounded moral viewpoints in the public square, we are not imposing anything on anyone. We are proposing. That's what citizens do in a democracy: We propose, we give reasons. It's a very strange doctrine that would only silence culturally conservative viewpoints. But the anesthesia was very effective. And of course the slogan was a bonanza for cowardly and unprincipled politicians.

When all is said and done, the challenge for Christian witness today is the same as it was when Our Lord told us 2,000 years ago that we must be the leaven in the loaf, the salt of the earth, and lights upon a hill. Though it is still a daunting challenge, at least it's a familiar one -- part of our regular job, so to speak. That should be encouraging. It's also encouraging to know that great works can grow from little seeds. As St. Paul told the Corinthians: "Do you not know that a little yeast has its effect all through the dough?" (1 Corinthians 5:6)

So, some of you may be wondering, what's the matter with American Catholics? After all, 62.4 million in the United States is a lot of yeast. But, as you may recall, St. Paul had some other things to say about yeast. Just as good yeast spreads all through the dough, so can bad yeast. He told the Corinthians, a prosperous, self-satisfied, commercial people, that they had to get rid of the bad yeast, and that it was in themselves, as well as in their community (5:7). To us Christians living in North America, he would surely say what he said to the Corinthians: "Do not conform yourselves to the spirit of the age." In other words, when you're trying to transform the culture, make sure that the culture is not transforming you!

Having painted a rather somber picture, I want to conclude by saying why I remain confident that with prayer, witness and determination we can overcome these obstacles. Our Catholic social and moral teaching corresponds to all that is best in American traditions. Our social teaching gives us a vision of a society that welcomes the stranger, that supports and honors motherhood, that lends a hand to the needy, that honors families engaged in the task of raising children because it knows that good parents are not just doing something for themselves but for all of us when they raise their children well. Our moral teaching resonates with the cherished American belief in the possibility of a fresh start. We believe that there is no sin that can't be forgiven if one faces up to it, sincerely repents, makes amends, and reforms one's life.

The challenge for Christian witness is first, to live those teachings by example, and second, to find ways suited for our times and places to articulate our Catholic vision in its fullness. We have to find and build on what is true and good in the culture, and denounce and reject what is false and harmful. That is what Christians have always tried to do, in and out of season, in good times and bad. That is what Christians will do in North America regardless of what history has in store for that continent.

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