WHO ARE WE? WHERE ARE WE GOING?

By
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The following remarks were offered by Monsignor James Shea in Aventura, Florida, upon receiving the 2022 Canterbury Medal from the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty on May 26, 2022.

The University of Mary has been coming to the Canterbury Gala ever since the Becket Fund tricked us into filing a lawsuit. That was years ago, probably around the time of my First Holy Communion.

In any case, we know what a significant event this is. So when word came to my office about the Medal, we were genuinely stunned. My assistant asked, “To receive that medal, don’t you have to be like a Supreme Court Justice or something?” I told him, “The Becket Fund would never give the Canterbury Medal to a Supreme Court Justice. The optics of that would be terrible. And there’s a big difference between being corrupt and being desperate!”

The people of the Becket Fund are not corrupt. They are some of the best people anyone could ever hope to meet this side of heaven: men and women of integrity, talent, intelligence, and devotion. They are so impressive and so effective that when I work with them they remind me for all the world of a small band of colonial lawyers who, some 250 years ago, led a revolution and launched a great experiment, who fashioned for us an astonishing charter of freedom and lit a bright lantern of liberty in a darkened world.

So it’s humbling to be associated in any way with the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, and I’m deeply grateful that I should be allowed to accept the Canterbury Medal not as a personal honor but on behalf of the University of Mary and all the others standing for medical conscience rights.

The book Bill Mumma mentioned, From Christendom to Apostolic Mission, is really just a very humble essay, not my own work so much as a kind of transcript of a conversation between a
group of friends who love God. But it does try to trace out the contours of a new age which has broken upon us, an age with great peril and bright promise.

Among the strange gifts offered to us by this new age is a gift of clarity. And that’s what I want to speak about tonight: clarity.

When freshmen come to the campus of the University of Mary for the first time to register for classes, I sometimes tell them an old legend of a rabbi from Capernaum of Galilee in Roman times. With apologies to all the real rabbis in the room who actually know how to tell stories, here’s my best attempt.

Rabbi Akiva was walking alone at twilight one evening, reciting psalms and prayers as he went along. Such was his reverie that he turned by accident onto the Via Maris, the road running from Syria down to Egypt. And without noticing, he came upon a Roman garrison. The sentry, standing at the front gate, saw his approach and called out, “Who are you, and where are you going?” The rabbi was too stunned and surprised to respond, and so the soldier repeated, “Who are you, and where are you going?” Finally, the rabbi said, “Soldier, how much do they pay you to stand there and ask that question?” The sentry, flustered, responded, “Four drachmas a week.” The rabbi said, “I’ll pay you twice that if you stand outside my front door and ask me that every morning.”

“Who are you, and where are you going?”

Who are we, we who stand for religious freedom? Where are we going?

I grew up the oldest of eight children on a dairy and grain farm in the middle of this country in the last days before the internet. It was also the last gasp of Christendom, and our farmhouse was filled with books about the Catholic faith.

I remember finding one day and reading in the hayloft a children’s novel about Saint Thomas Becket called All the Swords in England. It told of the adventures of two brothers, one who served as a squire for King Henry II and the other a servant in the household of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

I read there for the first time those immortal lines of that gripping drama. Henry’s rant: “Will no one rid me of this troublesome priest?” Becket’s words to his murderers: “If all the swords in England were pointed against my head, your threats could not move me!”

I remember sliding open the big door to the milk barn and gazing off to the horizon, wondering, “Someday, could I ever be a troublesome priest?” And my heart burned at the thought of it!

In moments like that, we can catch a glimpse of the sweeping, epic adventure of our lives.
That’s a clarity we really need to glimpse, because most of the time we know by faith that we are part of a terrific drama, but it’s so unfair that we have to live that drama out in the ordinary experience of the daily grind, with regular people who are neither very sinister nor very interesting, and with ourselves, in our great poverty and limitations. God sees what’s really happening, He sees the drama, He has filled His mind with us, but to us the experience is supremely toilsome.

That’s when we have to remember who we are.

The reason the world gives us so much trouble is that it is fundamentally unclear about who we are, where we are going, what we are doing and why. Modern progressive secularists think people of faith provide education, health care, services for the poor and suffering, foster care and adoptions, and other social services because those are good things that good people do. We’ve chosen a life of service, and philanthropic activity is satisfying and even self-actualizing. And if we get a chance to do that, to actualize ourselves, we’ll pay whatever price. Because, “at the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of the meaning of the universe, and of the mystery of human life” (Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pa. v. Casey).

But that’s not actually who we are.

Here’s who we are: “I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here I am. Send me’” (Isaiah 6:8).

And this: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39; cf. Deuteronomy 6:5).

We provide education, health care, services for the poor and suffering, foster care and adoptions, and other social services because we believe, deep within our souls, that God has asked it of us. Our lives have been overwhelmed by the demands of love. We are not service providers, we are not philanthropists, we are communities of faith responding in unity to the call of God.

This makes no sense at all to those whose vision of life excludes, in principle, the possibility of a transcendent calling and the existence of an invisible world. Only crazy people hear voices like that. Those kinds of moral demands upon a person’s life are other-worldly superstition brought about through priestcraft, the erstwhile dominion of a killjoy clergy. Nobody really believes that stuff anymore. It’s 2022. We have refrigeration… refrigeration! There are no people in the world who are unwilling to play the game to get along. And so if the culture or the state have a compelling interest to ensure that inclusive ideals of dignity, health, equality, or freedom are incorporated into our philanthropic work, that’s a modest request in exchange for getting to do what we do.
But that wouldn’t work if genuine persons or communities of faith really did exist. Because you can’t effectively say: “Listen, the price you have to pay for doing what you believe you’ve been called in truth by God to do is to do it in such a way that separates you from God and truth.” Or (if you want to say it this way): “The price for following your conscience is to violate your conscience.”

Let’s just consider for a moment the possibility that modern progressive secularists might be harassing us not out of malice, at least not at first, but because we haven’t convinced them that we’re for real, that there’s such a thing as fierce, unyielding allegiance to the invisible world.

They just can’t believe that we’re for real, because otherwise how could they think that we would trade in our ancient beliefs for some weird, new religion with doctrines and precepts like these?:

- The Little Sisters of the Poor have to pay for my morning-after pills or else they can’t care for the dying.
- The University of Mary and the Religious Sisters of Mercy have to pay for my sex change or else they can’t provide education or health care.

A religion with such beliefs is literally unbelievable, and yet it comes at us furiously, armed with inquisitions and excommunication, banishing our core convictions straight out of the American Constitutional order, seeding and ripening the bitter fruit of division and alienation. “Who would believe what we have heard?” (Isaiah 53:1).

There must be some kind of misunderstanding.

So what could we do to convince an unbelieving world with clarity that we really exist?

How about if we began to wave our arms and say something like this: we see your compelling state interest in dignity, health, equality, and freedom… and we’ll raise you double. Your regulations and rules claim to achieve certain ends in regard to dignity, health, equality, and freedom, but we have a body of practices and beliefs about sex, marriage, and parenting that achieve the same ends in a more effective way, in a way that better supports the vulnerable and children and those who are suffering the most, and we have empirical data to support our position.

Moreover, you tell us not to hate people with gender dysphoria, but how could we ever hate them? How could we ever bear rancor in our hearts for women and men who carry in their lives and personal experience such pain and bewilderment? You want us to be tolerant, but we won’t be tolerant. We can do much better than tolerance. Instead of just tolerating people,
we’ll rush out to meet them, we’ll embrace them as they are. We’ll say, “Hello. I won’t pay for your sex change surgery, but that doesn’t mean that you’re a bothersome problem, that you’re my enemy. And those who tell you that I’m your enemy are lying to you. I’ll listen to you and care for you as long as I can and in every way that I can. You are not a problem. You are my brother, my sister, and God put you in my life for a purpose. In darkness and confusion, you can count on me for genuine support and to speak the truth in love.”

Now we begin to see how the work of the Becket Fund is so necessary and at the same time so supremely insufficient. Religious freedom is a value we all share, but it’s not enough. We don’t aspire to a civilization of religious liberty, we aspire to a civilization of love. Religious liberty is not the end game, it just gives us the elbow room to reach into our hearts and then stretch our arms out widely to a world in need. The Constitution and Bill of Rights do not create but rather acknowledge and make space for the human capacity to serve from transcendent motivation.

When we are clear about who we are and where we are going, we can foster that civilization of love. Because the very same Voice that called us also imparts to us a love that is beyond our own capacity. It is a love that is radically faithful, self-sacrificing, creative, patient, permanent, generous, forgiving. It is a demanding love that asks us to lay down our lives for friend and enemy, to pick up the wounded stranger who tumbles onto our path. It is a love that answers consistently expressed human needs. It is a love of the kind and quality human beings were made to receive. And (by the way) teaching our children about this love is the greatest gift we can give to future generations and the greatest expression of our love for them.

Probably you’re all thinking: Listen to this country bumpkin! He’s giving the benefit of the doubt to the bad people! How long do we have to endure this naive jabbering from someone who comes from a place so cold that lawyers put their hands into their own pockets?!?

I know there’s a storm coming. I know that it’s already storming hard. I know that this cultural moment carries with it stern dangers. Men and women of faith cannot predict what lies on the other side of the storm. If we set out to convince the world that we are for real, we may win hearts and minds. There may be a new springtime for faith. Or we may experience even more violent rejection, along with legal and reputational punishment.

G.K. Chesterton once said, “It has been proved a hundred times over that if you really want to enrage people and make them angry, even unto death, the right way to do it is to tell them they are all the sons of God” (In Defense of Sanity).

All I know, in my intransigent naiveté, is that this has all happened before. Take the early Christians in the first centuries after Christ. They didn’t say to each other, “Let’s do some good around here and have organized efforts to provide social services, education, and health care.” No, they understood themselves to be a community of believers responding to God’s call to love Him and one another. And that call included practices regarding marriage, sex,
and parenting that inspired ferocious hostility and contempt in the Greco-Roman world of their time. But in the end, they won the day. They won over the culture. And what won the day was their fearless joy. Everybody wanted to know: “Who are these people, who join hands and sing hymns as lions lunge at them, who tell jokes while being grilled alive, who heap forgiveness upon those who are stoning them? They…must…be…for…real!”

Slowly but surely, over the course of long years, because of the clarity of their witness, the culture did begin to believe that they were for real. They existed! And that was the beginning of Christendom; they were laying the foundation for future centuries of faith.

That kind of faithful clarity is our task today, make no mistake. Tonight we dine on filet mignon, but the lions are at the door. We should probably learn some hymns together!

In the meantime, may God bless the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty.

May God bless our great nation, so magnificent in its ideals.

May God bless us all with faithful courage and blessed clarity.

And in all things, “may the tender mercies of the Lord our God be upon us. May He prosper the work of our hands for us. May He prosper the work of our hands” (Psalm 90:17).

Thank you.