

U. S. Catholic Bishops' Statement Stresses Religion As Our Most Vital National Asset

Washington, D. C., November 16 — (NC) — The Catholic Bishops of the United States, at the close of their Annual Meeting here, November 12-14, issued the following statement. It was signed in their names by the Administrative Board of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, whose members are: Edward Cardinal Mooney, Detroit; Samuel Cardinal Stritch, Chicago; Francis Cardinal Spellman, New York; Francis P. Keough, Archbishop of Baltimore; John J. Mitty, Archbishop of San Francisco; Richard J. Cushing, Archbishop of Boston; Joseph E. Ritter, Archbishop of St. Louis; Patrick A. O'Boyle, Archbishop of Washington; Karl J. Alter, Archbishop of Cincinnati; John F. Noll, Archbishop of Fort Wayne; Emmet M. Walsh, Coadjutor Bishop of Youngstown; Thomas K. Gorman, Coadjutor Bishop of Dallas; Matthew F. Brady, Bishop of Manchester.

RELIGION, OUR MOST VITAL NATIONAL ASSET

As Bishops of the Catholic Church, we are intensely concerned that the teachings of Jesus Christ, Our Lord and God, will bless and sanctify our country. As American citizens, our concern extends to those blessings which only true religion can bring to our beloved land. Our national spiritual assets must be greater than the national material assets which are so evident everywhere.

These material assets have brought a standard of living and a degree of comfort never before attained by so many people in any nation. With them has come a position of preeminence in the world hitherto unachieved by peaceful means.

In the wake of such unprecedented prosperity a deep sense of security, a national optimism might have been expected. In its stead the temper of the country would seem to be one of restless foreboding and deep insecurity.

It cannot be denied that this gloomy and depressing atmosphere is largely a reflection of so much suffering and hopelessness in other parts of the world. Yet it must be affirmed with equal insistence that there is a lowering of vitality in our social institutions, a deplorable pessimism that signals the presence of a cause as dangerous as it is profound.

The history of nations teaches us that ultimately it is spiritual losses rather than material reverses that lead to moral bankruptcy and national ruin. Across the centuries, strewn with the wreckage of once flourishing realms, the words of the Lord of Nations echo a warning in our ears: "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His justice and all these things shall be given you besides." The corollary is inescapable: "If you seek not the Kingdom of God, all these things will be taken from you."

Religion makes man a citizen of the Kingdom of God; for it is through religion that man gives his allegiance to his Maker. Viewed in its entirety, religion is the system of beliefs and practices by which man comes to the knowledge of the one true God, by which he gives to God the worship which is His due, by which he renders thanks for all he is and has, acknowledges and explains his own guilt, and begs the grace that makes it possible for him to attain his true destiny.

As an act, religion is the communion of man with God, the source of all life. It is this that explains the essential importance of religion to man both as an individual and as a member of society, a citizen of a nation. Religion, then, is not only the individual's most precious possession, it is also a nation's most vital asset.

MAN'S NEED OF RELIGION

Man, as an individual, needs religion. He needs it for many reasons. He needs it because he is a creature of God, entirely dependent on his Creator, and hence must acknowledge his obligation of adoration and love. He needs it to give meaning to his present existence; for without religion this life, with its disappointments, its uncertainty, its cruelty and its suffering, becomes "but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more . . . a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Again, man needs religion to give him that sense of responsibility which prevents human existence from becoming a wilderness of warring passions and aimless strivings. He needs religion because, apart from God, man is lonely and he can never find in himself or in the institutions which bear his image the means to fill up that void of loneliness which is in the human heart.

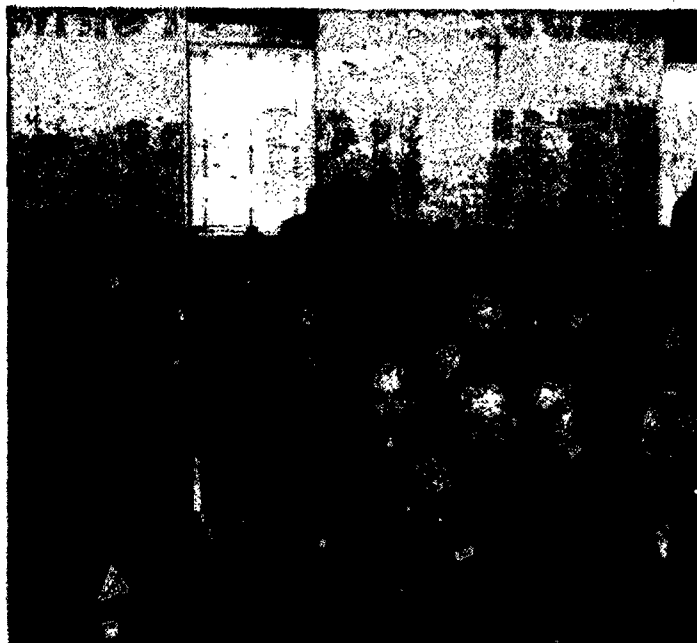
Man needs religion because he is weak, and in his weakness he must have access to the Source of all strength. Man needs religion because without the hope that religion alone can give, he cannot rise above that pessimism, that sense of despair, which threatens to engulf the whole of our civilization.

Man needs religion because he has an impelling need to worship, and if he does not worship God he will direct his worship to base objects that will pervert his mind and heart.

RELIGION A FUNDAMENTAL NEED OF SOCIETY

Religion, necessary to individual man, is necessary also to human society. From the very beginning the family, the primary unit of society, has been intimately dependent on religion, and from it has drawn its unity, its stability and its

More than 120 Archbishops and Bishops attended the annual General Meeting of the United States Hierarchy (lower photo) at the Catholic University of America, Washington, D. C. Shown at the preceding table during the opening session are, left to right: Their Eminences Samuel Cardinal Stritch, Archbishop of Chicago; Edward Cardinal Mooney, Archbishop of Detroit and Francis Cardinal Spellman, Archbishop of New York.



tion of Independence and on which they based the Constitution and our Bill of Rights, is essentially a religious concept—a concept inherited from Christian tradition. Human equality stems from the fact that all men have been created by God and equally endowed by Him with rights rooted in human nature itself. Against any other background, human equality has no meaning.

The proclamation of March 30, 1863 seems even more pertinent today than it was at the time it was issued.

"We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven; we have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity . . . but we have forgotten God, and we have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us."

The whole idea of government, dedicated to the welfare of the human person, in the common good and subject to God's Eternal Law, is derived from the religious concepts of man and society which our Founders inherited from their Christian tradition.

The Founders of this country were deeply conscious of this debt to religion. The long deliberations to which they submitted the First Amendment to the Constitution and the many revisions it underwent before adoption bear witness to the important place religion occupied in the minds of the first Congress. Certainly it was not their purpose to eliminate the influence of religion on public life. On the contrary it was their intention to guarantee to religion its essential freedom.

In a country of divided religious allegiance, the Federal Government was indeed prohibited from setting up any established religion; but it was also prohibited from interfering in any way with any religious institution or with the freedom of the individual in the practice of the religion of his conscientious choice.

That nothing other than this was intended, that the Federal Government was not prevented from encouraging and even aiding religion, so long as no particular form of religion should be established by the State, is clear not only from the wording of the First Amendment but also from the fact that from the beginning, under the Constitution and its Amendments many practices have flourished which have continued to give great help to religion.

Apart from the record of deliberation and the wording of the First Amendment itself, there is abundant evidence that this carefully thought out solution was not indicative of indifference and still less of hostility to religion. Both the Northwest and Southwest Ordinances, passed by the very men who were responsible for the Amendment, speak of religion and morality as "necessary for the good government and the happiness of mankind."

And even more pointed are the words used by our first President in his Farewell Address: "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports . . . Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."

Such were the prevailing convictions of the Founders of this country? Such too were the traditions which have in large measure determined the course of its development. No one has better expressed American traditions or has contributed more to their development than Abraham Lincoln. Eight times during the term of his pres-



deny he issued proclamations of thanksgiving and of days of prayer and fasting which strongly emphasize this nation's need of religion.

The differences which are those which divide our people in their duty to loyalty, patriotism and good citizenship. Education of children in schools under religious auspices has no such effect. On the contrary, the religious instruction children receive in such schools inculcates the duties of loyalty, patriotism and civic service based on love of God of neighbor and country. Education that is truly religious is then a unifying rather than a dividing force.

Particularly difficult to understand is the attitude of some few who, while occupying positions of leadership in various religious groups, yet in almost every question involving the influence of religion in public life and education, throw the weight of their influence behind Secularism. In the days when Communism was posing as a new and advanced kind of democracy, some of these persons were loud in their praise of practically everything that came out of the realms of atheism and tyranny.

Now that it is no longer fashionable to regard Communism as other than the avowed enemy of our own country, they indeed maintain a discreet silence on the subject of Communist virtues, but they still throw the weight of their influence behind such totalitarian movements as an all-embracing state-controlled school system and education completely devoid of religion. Although they often lay claim to the title of Christian, they are rather devotees of the pseudo-religion of progress; and they always think of progress in terms of materialistic or secularistic evolution.

Consciously or unconsciously, in eliminating the influence of religion and in working for the absolutism of majority vote, they are promoting the disintegration of those social institutions whose foundations are in religion—freedom, human dignity, equality, the stable family, and that constitutional democracy which has been characteristic of this country.

IRRELIGION, OUR REAL DANGER
The real danger to our country comes not from any division likely to result from religious education or professorship. It comes rather from the threatening disintegration of our social life, due to the weakening of religion as a constructive force. With the decline of religious belief, the increase of divorce and family disintegration has become a national scandal. With the break-up of the family, juvenile delinquency has shown an alarming increase.

Consequent upon the weakening of religion there has been a lowering of moral standards which has resulted in public corruption—and this in turn threatens all respect for law and public authority. The imminent threat to our country comes not from religious divisiveness but from irreligious social decay. The truly religious man is certain to be one who treasures all those ideals which religion helped to build into this nation.

To the man who is lacking in religious belief, nothing in the end is likely to be sacred, nothing worth preserving. In that direction lies the real danger to our country.

FUNDAMENTAL OBLIGATIONS OF A RELIGIOUS PEOPLE

Although there have been many evidences of the weakening of religion among our people, in recent times there have been unmistakable signs of a renewed religious interest. The number of religious books which have attained wide circulation, the frequent serious discussion of religious topics in the daily papers and influential periodicals, the reported increase everywhere in Church attendance, the frequent and effective use of radio and television for religious programs—all these are encouraging signs.

Moreover the vitality of the religious tradition in our country has recently been attested by the Supreme Court, when in its majority opinion it stated that "We are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being," and when it declared that "when the State encourages religious instruction or cooperates with religious authorities . . . it follows the best of our traditions."

But our best religious traditions are not fulfilled by mere theoretical acknowledgment of religion as a possible aid in solving our problems, or by a perfunctory attendance at Sunday devotions, or even by a still bow on the part of Government in the general direction of God. If our country is truly religious, the influence of religion will permeate every part of our national life. The State will not merely tolerate religion; it will honor and welcome it as an indispensable aid in building the complete good life of its citizens—such as the influence of religion has been welcomed in our Armed Forces.

In its internal and external affairs the State will uphold, and it will expect its citizens and its officials to uphold, that standard of morality which flows necessarily from belief in God and in God's law. From its own officials and employees it will demand an even stricter observance of the moral standard than it can enforce upon individual citizens or business institutions.

whole existence. Once the opportunity of such reflection was afforded largely by the reverent observance of Sunday, the day of the Lord. We call upon our people to return to the proper religious observance of the Lord's day and the practice of family prayer.

It is a cherished tradition for our government to call its citizens to prayer and public worship. Too often the proclamation of days of prayer, traditional in our country, has come to be regarded by many as a pious formality. The realization of the immeasurable benefits we have received from Almighty God, the further realization that only under God's guidance can we hope to solve our problems and overcome our perils will restore to these days their sacred character. The truly religious observance of such days as our religious feasts and national holidays will deepen and enrich the spiritual life of the whole nation.

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THE ROLE OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

One of the constant dangers to the religious spirit in a country such as ours is the tendency to regard religion itself simply as the fruit of pious sentiment; or to hold, as the doctrinal basis of religion, what we may call the common factor in the religious opinions held by various groups; or to be content with the great religious truths of the natural order which can be known by unaided human reason.

It is true that the Founders of this country, in their public utterances, gave as the religious foundation of their work only the truths of the natural order—belief in God as the Omnipotent Creator; belief in man as God's free creature endowed with inalienable rights; belief in the eternal truth and universality of the moral law. But it is also true that these convictions were part of their Christian tradition.

Historically these truths had been received and elaborated by intellects illumined by faith and guided by revelation. It would be wrong to imagine that these truths are sufficient for the religious life of the individual, or that they can of themselves guarantee the firm foundation of society. After all, the truths which can be known by reason are but a part of religious truth. It is through su-

pernatural faith alone that man comes to the knowledge of religious truth in its fullness.

Man is not free to pick and choose among the truths God has made known either through reason or revelation. His obligation is to accept the whole of God's truth. Man himself is not merely a creature of the natural order. At the moment of creation he was elevated by God to the supernatural state and destined to an everlasting and supernatural life. To the fall of man from his high estate are traceable all the woes which have marked human history.

To save man from the eternal consequences of his fall, to pay the penalty of his sins and to restore him to his supernatural state and destiny, the Son of God became man, suffered and died on the Cross for the salvation of all mankind. In the accomplishment of the work of Redemption Christ has given us the fullness of God's revelation. To attain to his destiny, therefore, man needs not merely the truths which reason can discover; he needs also the truths which Christ has revealed; he needs the Church which Christ has established.

All the religious truths, natural and supernatural, are parts of one integral whole. Ultimately in man's mind they must stand or fall together. Subtract one part and you distort the rest; deny one part and in the end you deny the whole. Now, in the light of Divine Revelation, can the principles of natural ethics be separated from the principles of Christian morality. Only the life of Christian faith can guarantee to man in his present state the moral life; and the Christian life is lived in its entirety only through the one true Church of Christ.

In our present day world it has become clear that denial of supernatural truth tends fatally to the denial of all religious truth. "I will show you the truth and the truth will make you free." In Christ's design truth and freedom stand together. If today Christianity stands for freedom, it is because Christianity is truth.

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