It’s a pleasure to be here tonight, and I’m grateful to Dr. Kromkowski and the institute community for inviting me. I also look forward to your questions and some time for discussion after these remarks. That’s usually the best part of any talk.

Two points before I start. First, I’m a pastor, not a scholar. And my interest in this material tonight is helping people get to heaven, not to Washington. Politics is important, but it’s not why God made us.

Second, my original plan for this evening was to talk about “the political and social structures of the common good.” The reason was pretty simple. I was reading, or trying to read, Alasdair MacIntyre’s book, *Dependent Rational Animals*, last fall. And that theme – “the political and social structures of the common good” – is the title of a very valuable chapter by MacIntyre on the nation, the family and the problems of ensuring the common good.

The trouble is, MacIntyre is not exactly a sunny source of hope when it comes to liberal democracy. And I don’t think we should give up – at least not yet -- on the possibilities for good that still reside in our system of public life. That led me in the direction of our topic tonight. So let’s begin.

Speaking to the Constitutional Convention in 1787, Benjamin Franklin said the following words:

“I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth: that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid? We have been assured . . . in the sacred writings that ‘except the Lord build the House, they labor in vain that build it.’ I firmly believe this; and I also believe that without [God’s] concurring aid, we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel: We shall be divided by our little, partial, local interests; our projects will be confounded, and we ourselves shall become a reproach and bye-word down to future ages.”

Of course, Franklin was a Deist, and he’s better known for his romantic escapades than his religious piety. But what he said is still true. As a nation, the United States is built on a religious anthropology. It presumes a moral architecture shaped deeply by biblical thought and belief.

It’s also true that Classical and Enlightenment ideas played an important role in the Founding. But the Enlightenment itself is inconceivable outside the Christian culture from which it emerged, and from which it borrowed its moral vocabulary.
Here’s my point in making these observations. Like most Americans, I love my country. I believe that Americans are a great people, a good people. I believe that America remains a great experiment in human freedom. But it’s an experiment that depends on certain assumptions. First among those assumptions is the dignity of the human person. And human dignity is an idea that makes little sense without God.

What we believe -- or don’t believe -- about God profoundly shapes what we believe about the nature of the human person and the purpose of human society. It follows that the more we remove God from our public life, the more we remove the moral vocabulary that gives our public institutions meaning. The more secularized we become, the more we undermine the common good and the more we feed the problems that are hurting us as a nation.

Now these are strong claims. But they were obvious and true to the Founders, many of whom were Christian, and all of whom understood and respected the role of religious faith in sustaining a healthy republic. Politics is the arena where the struggle between truth and lies, justice and injustice, takes place. No nation’s political life can be honest -- and no government can serve the needs of its people -- unless it welcomes the deepest convictions of its citizens into public debate.

In the American tradition, people have a duty to bring their beliefs to bear on every social, economic and political problem facing their community. That’s not just a privilege. And it’s not just a right. It’s a duty. For American Christians, to do so is a demand of the Gospel and a very practical expression of Christian love. Obviously, we have an obligation to respect the dignity of other people and their own basic rights as well. We’re always bound to treat other people with charity, justice and prudence. But that can never be an excuse for our own inaction or silence.

Unless we live our faith not just in our private behaviors, but also in our public actions, including our political involvement, then we’re living a lie. We’re lying to ourselves, because we’re not really serious about our faith unless we have the zeal and the courage to witness it. And we’re also cheating our fellow citizens. In a democracy, the best gift any of us can give to our country is the public witness of our convictions. Democracy depends on an honest, unashamed, public struggle of ideas. If we withhold our religious and moral beliefs from our political debates because of a misguided sense of good manners, we are not being “polite.” On the contrary: We’re stealing from the public conversation.

I said a moment ago that I love my country. Here’s what that means. In Catholic moral tradition, patriotism is associated with the Fourth Commandment: You shall honor your father and mother, a duty that the Baltimore Catechism describes as “filial piety and patriotism.” In other words, patriotism is a virtue, a genuinely noble thing, when it roots itself in a love for the best qualities in our homeland and our fellow citizens. This is why military service and public office are not just socially useful jobs, but – at their best – good and honorable vocations. Politics can be a rough and messy business, and free societies rarely look dignified. But that doesn’t subtract from the importance of the law, which is tied intimately to the search for human justice and happiness. And the messiness of politics doesn’t diminish the urgency of our public witness, or the importance of the sacrifices we make as citizens in seeking the common good.
The political process of electing good leaders and making good laws is a gift because it gives us a share in the authority that God delegates to men and women in building a just society.

Catholics believe that each human life has a unique but interrelated meaning. We were made by God to receive love ourselves, and to show love to others. That’s our purpose. For a Christian, love is not simply a feeling. It’s much more than an emotion. Real love is an act of the will; a sustained choice that proves itself not just by what we say or feel, but by what we do for the good of others.

Since God created all human persons and guarantees their dignity by his Fatherhood, we have family duties to one another. This means our faith has social as well as personal implications. And those social implications include the civil dimension of our shared life; in other words, the content of our politics.

In the Bible, the first three of the Ten Commandments govern our relationship with God. But the next seven outline our obligations to other people. The Epistle of James warns us that faith without works is dead (1:22), and to be doers of God’s word and not hearers only (2:17). John’s Gospel says that we will know the truth, and the truth will make us free (8:32) — not comfortable; and not respected; but free in the real sense of the word: in other words, able to see and do what’s right.

To put it another way, in the Christian tradition, freedom is meant to be used in the service of others. Working to defend the dignity of human persons and the dignity of the human family is an obligation of our freedom. This is why helping the poor is so important. This is why laws that protect the unborn child, the immigrant and persons with disabilities are so vital. St. Augustine wrote that the state not governed by justice is no more than a gang of thieves. So it’s here, in the search for justice, that the Catholic citizen engages the political world because, as Benedict XVI said in his encyclical Deus Caritas Est, “justice is both the aim and the intrinsic criterion of all politics.” In fact, the just ordering of society and the state “is the central responsibility of politics.”

Jesus never absolved us from resisting and healing the evil in the world. He never excused us from solidarity with the poor, the hungry, the unborn child, the broken families and the elderly who bear the burden of being ignored by selfish societies.

Therefore the “separation of Church and state” can never mean that religious believers should be silent about legislative issues, the appointment of judges or public policy. It’s not the job of the Church to run political candidates. But it’s very much the job of the Church to help Catholics think and act in accord with their faith, whether they be voters or candidates themselves. It’s very much the job of the Church to speak up for human dignity and all the best ideals on which the American experiment depends.

To put it another way, for Catholics, the civil order has its own sphere of responsibility and its own autonomy apart from the Church. But that doesn’t mean that civil authorities are exempt from moral engagement and criticism, either by individual believers or by the Church as a body. And this fits very comfortably with the mind of the Founders.
What the Founders intended was to prevent the establishment of an official state Church. They never intended, and never wrote into the Constitution, any prohibition against religious believers, religious leaders or religious communities taking an active role in public issues and the political process. The idea of exiling religion from public debate would have made no sense to them.

Our history as a nation is steeped in religious imagery, convictions and language. The idea that we can pull those religious roots out of our political life without hurting our identity as a nation is both imprudent and dangerous. The United States is non-sectarian, and that’s important. But “non-sectarian” does not mean anti-religious, atheist, agnostic or even fully secularized. Again, our public institutions flow – in large part -- from a religious understanding of human rights, human nature and human dignity.

Therefore the Church can’t be silent in public life and be faithful to Jesus Christ at the same time. We need to remember a fundamental democratic fact: Working respectfully and firmly to form the public conscience violates no one’s free will. Actively witnessing to our convictions and advancing what we believe about key moral issues in public life is not “coercion.” It’s an act of truth-telling. It’s an act of honesty. It’s vital to the health of every democracy. And it’s also a duty -- not only of our religious faith, but also of our citizenship.

It’s good to recall that the roots of the American experience are deeply Protestant. And these roots go back a very long way, to well before the nation’s founding. Catholics have little reason to remember the Puritans fondly. But whatever one thinks of the early Puritan colonists, no one can study Gov. John Winthrop’s great 1630 sermon – written on the Atlantic Ocean as he led 700 souls to New England -- without being moved by the zeal of the faith that produced it. In “A model of Christian charity,” he told his fellow colonists:

“We are a company professing ourselves fellow members of Christ . . . [We] must love one another with pure heart fervently. We must bear one another’s burdens . . . We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others’ necessities . . . We must delight in each other; make others’ conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So we will keep the unity of [God’s] spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as his own people . . . [And so we] must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.”

That’s not a bad summary of Christian discipleship.

Of course, it’s common today – in fact, it’s too common and too easy – to see Winthrop’s vivid image of a “city upon a hill” as the root of American triumphalism. But that’s not what he imagined or intended. John Winthrop meant that we would be watched, and judged, by how much we loved each other. Like it or not, our nation’s best ideals are incoherent and unsustainable without their religious grounding. And as we lose that grounding, our problems become worse.
The idea of the city is extremely powerful in man’s imagination because it conjures up images of commerce, energy, progress and community. The city is a living example – a symbol to the world -- of the best and also the worst in human nature. It’s understandable, then, that Scripture has a sometimes mixed attitude toward the city. Sodom and Gomorrah are the “cities of the plain,” and we know how that turned out. But Jerusalem is longed for and revered as the “holy city,” the heart of Jewish life. And from the New Testament, John Winthrop would have been keenly aware of Matthew 5:14 – “You are the light of the world; a city upon a hill cannot be hidden” – and Revelation 21:2, “And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”

As I mentioned earlier, St. Augustine once said that the state not governed by justice is no more than a gang of thieves. Augustine wrote those words in the greatest of his works, *The City of God* – a book that deliberately contrasts the earthly city, the second Babylon, the City of Man, with God’s holy city, the heavenly city, our true destiny and home, the New Jerusalem.

In the mind of Augustine, we were made for the City of God, but we pass through the City of Man on the pilgrimage of our lives. We can never have perfect justice in the earthly city because of sin. But we can make the world around us better or worse by what we do and how we live as “resident aliens” in the City of Man.

Augustine has always had a very deep influence on me; not because he was a great writer, or a great scholar, or even a great model for bishops, though he was all those things. Augustine moves the hearts of so many people -- despite his skepticism about the world and human nature – because he understood how to love.

In his great book of conversion, *The Confessions*, he wrote that “my weight is my love.” My weight is my love. It’s one of his most famous lines, but many people are confused when we hear it for the first time. We need to listen to Augustine’s words in context, as he speaks to God:

“The body by its own weight,” Augustine writes, “gravitates toward its own place. Weight goes not downward only, but to its own place. Fire tends upward, a stone downward. They are propelled by their own weights, they seek their own places . . . My weight is my love; by it am I borne wherever I am borne. By Your gift we are inflamed, and are borne upward; we wax hot inwardly, and go forward. We ascend Your ways that be in our heart, and sing a song of degrees; we glow inwardly with . . . Your good fire, and we go, because we go upward to the peace of Jerusalem; for glad was I when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord. There has Your good pleasure placed us, that we may desire no other thing than to dwell there forever.”

For Augustine, the fire of our love carries us upward on its heat. The more we love, the higher we rise toward heaven.

But why is any of that important for our discussion here today?
Here’s why. In Dante’s *Inferno*, the lowest place in hell, the very bottom of the pit, is a lake of ice, not fire. Why ice? The reason for the ice comes directly from that famous line of St. Augustine: *My weight is my love*. Hell at its very worst is *bitterly* cold, *savagely* cold, because love is utterly absent. The soul is damned and dragged down by the cold weight of its own anger and pride, conflict, selfishness, despair, treachery and hate. And it turns out that even in hell, too, there’s a city – a very different kind of city of iron walls and malice that guards the entrance to the lowest circles of the pit. And its name is the City of Dis.

My point is this: Nations have weight. The “weight” of a nation is the love that animates -- or fails to animate -- its treatment of the poor, the elderly, the person with disabilities, the unborn child.

Each of our lives matters. What we do has consequences for our own eternity and those around us. And our lives gathered together as a nation shape the conscience and the future of the “city upon a hill” that John Winthrop imagined, and that we have inherited.

We were made by God to receive love ourselves, and to *show love to others*. And by “love” I mean *real* love, love anchored in the truth about the human person and the nature of human relationships. That’s our purpose. That’s why we were created. We’re here to bear each other’s burdens; to sacrifice ourselves for the needs of others; and to live a witness of Christian love – not only in our personal lives, but in all our public actions, including every one of our social, economic and political choices.

*City of God; City of Dis*: The road to each leads through the same City of Man. So choose wisely and well.