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Catholics at the Capitol
Homily
The Most Rev. Ronald Gainer
February 21, 2006

Scriptures: Isaiah 58: 6-11; Matthew 5: 42-48

This wonderful gathering is a source of excitement and hope for us all. In the name of Archbishop Kelly and Bishops McRaith and Foys, I want to thank all of you participants who have gathered here at the capitol from all around the Commonwealth for these important days. Also on behalf of the other bishops, I want to thank the staff of the Catholic Conference of Kentucky and the associated offices of the Kentucky League for Educational Alternatives and Opportunities for Life for all the work they have done in preparation for this program.

We are here because we are interested in public policy. We are here because we want to support legislation that promotes Gospel values and the Church's social teachings and we want to defeat legislation that does not. In this year's long legislative session of the general assembly there are bills regarding abortion, students safety, funding affordable housing, increasing the minimum wage, immigration, tax credits to help students—and these are just a few of our legislative priorities.

In recent years there have been two important trends that we need to note. First, there is the movement of more and more Catholic women and men to the center of political and social life in our country. Secondly, we have witnessed the progressive devolution of responsibility for more and more public policy from the federal level to the states. Few institutions, if any, can match the organizational strength of the Catholic Church at the state level. The question is not does religion matter in the public square. It does, and that is why we are here. The real issue is how can we exercise an important influence on the formation of public policy and why we need to be that important influence regarding issues such as human life, education, economic justice, healthcare and criminal justice.

The statement of the United States Bishops regarding faithful citizenship is worth recalling here:

The challenge for our church is to be principled without being ideological, to be political without being partisan, to be civil without being soft, to be involved without being used. Our moral framework does not easily fit the categories of left or right, Republican or Democrat. We are called

to measure every party and movement by how its agenda touches human life and dignity.

Those words are an eloquent articulation of why you and I are obliged to take up an active part in the making of public policy and an eloquent statement of how we are to do it. The point of reference for all of our legislative efforts is human life and human dignity as we understand those truths from God's Word and our Church's teachings on social justice.

The readings from today's Liturgy of the Word provide a wonderful lens through which we can look at our involvement in the public square.

Our first reading is taken from the 58th chapter of the prophet, Isaiah. His message falls in perfect sync with the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. In the prophetic tradition, there was no value in religious activities, pilgrimage, festivals and even sacrifices, if those who participated in them ignored the rest of their covenant obligations. Time and time again, prophets railed against the people of Israel for emphasizing their elaborate rituals and sacrifices while tolerating—even promoting—the neglect of the poor and the powerless and the other demands of social justice to which they were obliged by their covenant with God.

This temptation is not something limited to ancient times. There is even for us a perennial risk regarding our liturgical and devotional practices. For years as a priest I would warn others and myself regarding the danger that our worship and our prayer life can become perfunctory or mechanical. But there is another very important danger. There is a perennial risk that our liturgical and devotional practices can become seductive. I think that is what happened to ancient Israel and I know it can happen to us.

Our rituals offer psychological, emotional and social satisfaction. They can be soothing and comforting. The danger is they can become disconnected from individual and communal righteousness. It is not for nothing that every Eucharistic liturgy ends with our being dismissed from the table of God's word and the table of the Eucharist.

Having been nourished by these undeserved gifts we are always sent forth to be servants of Christ and His Gospel in the world. We are told, "Get out of here" and be my hands, feet, mind, voice and heart in the world. It is also significant that whenever possible it is the voice of the deacon that dismisses us from the Eucharistic liturgy. He is the minister who by sacred ordination is conformed to the person of Christ the Servant as a minister of the Word, altar and charity. How appropriate, then, that the deacon's voice is the one that sends us forth to serve all of those who are in need.

True worship requires correcting injustice and providing for the needy. The failure to do this is exactly why God rebuked Israel through his prophet Isaiah. Isaiah told his contemporaries, "If you wish your liturgy and prayers to be heard by God, then you must hear the cry of the poor." Israel was told that they would be raised up only to the extent that they raised up the least among them: the widow, the orphan, the alien, the powerless - all of whom can so easily be invisible to our eyes. Only when Israel embraced and responded to God's call to self-sacrificing social justice—only then would God hear them, heed them, notice them, protect and restore them.

This is the Judeo-Christian foundation for activism in the public square—for promoting the common good in its truest and fullest meaning, that is, the sum total of those conditions

necessary—economic, political, material, cultural, spiritual— for all people to realize their full human dignity and reach their full human potential.

Our Lord in the 5th Chapter of Matthew's Gospel builds on that prophetic tradition. The passage we heard is taken from our Lord's Sermon on the Mount where Jesus speaks with shocking authority and concentrated focus on the way his disciples are to relate to others, especially those who disagree with them or who are their enemies.

In that Gospel proclamation, we heard the word “love” used several times. The New Testament word used here is AGAPE. This love is not a warm, tender affection. It is not a feeling of the heart. There were other Greek words to express those human sentiments. Matthew used the word AGAPE to translate Jesus' words in the Sermon. My favorite rendering into English of that Greek word AGAPE is unconquerable benevolence, invincible goodwill. This kind of love is not a matter of the heart but of the mind and will. This kind of love is only possible in Jesus Christ who can conquer our natural tendencies to anger, small mindedness, bitterness and self-centeredness. In the gospel Jesus tells us to pray for our enemies and persecutors on the understanding that we could never hate someone in the presence of God. Through prayer we bring ourselves consciously into God's presence and it ought to be impossible for us to hate another human being while we are consciously in God's presence. Just as I have, I am sure that you have always found this passage to be challenging. It places great demands on our usual way of being. And yet, this is a teaching so central to our call to discipleship that each of us must say over and over again: This means me.

As we gather for Catholics at the Capital, we indeed face great challenges. But we have hope. Both of our readings from the Word of God are equally challenging and yet on all fronts there is hope. There is always hope. The passage from Isaiah after rebuking and challenging its hearers ends by promising that God will bring strength and renewal and peace to His people. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers us the hope that through Him we have the capacity through our sharing in His own Life to be perfected even as our Heavenly Father is perfect. There is hope. There is always hope. We gather here at the Capital, we gather here at the Eucharist to allow God to direct us, to encourage us and to fill us with that hope which is beyond all understanding.