

“Restoring America’s Moral Compass: Leadership and the Common Good”

Pope John XXIII Lecture

Remarks as Prepared

State Treasurer Robert P. Casey, Jr. (PA)

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It is an honor to be asked to speak here today in the 38th annual Pope John XXIII lecture. I am humbled to be following such distinguished lecturers, including my own father who spoke here in 1994. I would like to thank the President of Catholic University, Father O’Connell, the Dean of the Law School, Dean Veryl Miles, and the faculty and students for this invitation. I am looking forward to our discussion over the next hour...

After I graduated from Holy Cross and before I came here to Catholic University Law School, I spent a year in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. I taught fifth grade and coached the basketball team at the Gesu School at 18th and Thompson streets in North Philadelphia. The Gesu was and is a wonderful school in a low-income, inner-city neighborhood. Kindergarten through eighth grade, the school is run by Jesuit fathers and IHM sisters, but few of the students are Catholic.

The children at the Gesu taught me more than I could ever teach them. I learned much about their struggles and the challenges their family faced everyday. During my year at the Gesu, I lived in another section of North Philly, near 23rd and Tioga Streets. You learn a lot about a city and its people by living in a neighborhood and riding public transportation. I remember riding the 33 Bus in the morning and evening and seeing working mothers get on the bus with grocery bags and their children. I was not in Scranton any more.

My short year as a Jesuit volunteer had a profound impact on my life, and the struggles of those I met in the inner city continue to inspire me. Those lessons I learned are central to what I’d like to talk to you about today.

I am here today to talk to you about an America where we are known for what unites us, not what keeps us apart; where we are better defined by our hopes, not our fears; where we measure our success as a nation not by the abundance of those who have much but by the opportunities for those who have little; and where our moral authority rather than just our military might is what maintains our superpower status throughout the world. I speak of what we all know America must be: a country dedicated to the common good.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ latest publication of a Guide to Faithful Citizenship states: “Politics in this election year and beyond should be about an old idea with new power – the common good. The central question should not be, ‘Are you better off than you were four years ago?’ It should be, ‘How can we – all of us, especially the weak and vulnerable – be better off in the years ahead?’”

That’s the right question.

My understanding of our common good comes from my family and my faith. Anyone growing up in a family of eight children learns about the importance of the common good whether you want to or not. But I was especially blessed to have parents who taught me about the common good by the way they lived their lives and raised our family.

My understanding of the common good also comes from my faith: faith in God, that all things will ultimately work to His greater good; and my faith in the ingenuity, compassion, and generosity of all Americans to give their time, talent, and treasure to make this country great. There is a beautiful definition of “faith” in the book of Hebrews. The scriptures tell us, “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” I will get into the substance of my hopes in just a minute, but the evidence of our country’s potential is not so hard to see because we’ve been there before.

When I was growing up, most parents believed that their children would have better lives and more opportunities than they themselves had, and we all believed in the promise of tomorrow and a brighter future. A perfect example of that belief was my grandfather, Alphonsus L. Casey, who went to work in the darkness and danger of the anthracite coal mines as a mule boy when he was just 11 years old. The novelist Stephen Crane wrote about miners and mule boys “toiling in this city of endless night.” And he described how mule boys would carry a lamp and “run ahead with the light” in the darkness. Only in a country like America could a mule boy go on to earn a law degree and create a new life for himself and his family, one that would inspire his son to carry a different kind of light as the governor of Pennsylvania.

But something seems to have changed in recent years. Instead of hope, fear threatens to become the pervasive feeling in this country. We now live in a country where, according to a recent Pew study, only one third of all parents expect their children to be better off than they themselves are. And around the world, America is losing the moral authority that has made us the standard for other nations to emulate. Many factors play into these changes. But at the core is something quite simple: Many of our leaders have lost their moral compass and no longer seem to believe that the purpose of government should be to promote the common good.

Justice

The common good must first be based upon a solid foundation of justice. As Saint Augustine taught us: “Without justice, what are kingdoms but great bands of robbers?” Justice cannot abide 34 million people in poverty and 8.3 million children without health care. Justice cannot ignore the suffering of millions of parents in this country who have to face the soul-crushing thought that they might have to tell their child to go to bed hungry...or who realize that they simply cannot afford the medical treatment their child needs. Justice demands our understanding that the hungry, the impoverished, and the uninsured in this country are not statistics, they are children of God. They are our brothers and sisters, our fellow Americans.

We see poverty on the rise and middle-income families struggling to make ends meet *not* because they lack the drive to make a better life for themselves and their families. Rather, the problem stems from mistaken priorities and failed leadership. As Franklin Delano Roosevelt stated so wisely, “It is an unfortunate human failing that a full pocketbook often groans more loudly than an empty stomach.” And that is exactly what we’ve seen. At a time when the

number of working poor in this country keeps increasing year after year, tax cuts for the wealthy should not be the price we are asked to pay for an increase in the minimum wage.

Just a few weeks ago, we remembered the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. The inexcusable response to Katrina was not the result of malice, but of malign neglect on the part of our government. Katrina stands as a tragic example of what happens when governments are so consumed with their own agenda that they stop paying attention to the needs of their people.

Sadly, soaring deficits and mistaken priorities have also spawned a series of “slower-moving Katrinas” that threaten our schools, our environment, our economy, and our security. Devastation doesn’t always come with the awful swiftness of a hurricane. Often it takes years. But neglect, fueled by arrogance, can cause problems to fester. All Americans are affected when our government does not fulfill its duties. But far too often it is the least, the last, and the lost among us who pay the greatest price for our governmental failings.

As my father once wrote:

“Only government, when all else fails, can safeguard the vulnerable and powerless. When it reneges on that obligation, freedom becomes a hollow word. A hard-working person unable to find work and support his or her family is not free. A person for whom sickness means financial ruin, with no health insurance to soften the blow, is not free. A malnourished child, an uneducated child, a child trapped in foster care – these children are not free. And without a few breaks along the way from government, such children in most cases will never be truly free.”

When our government seeks to reward the powerful and enrich the wealthy at the expense of the average working American, it is no longer a question of economics or politics. It is a question of justice.

Integrity & Compassion

The common good must also be based upon compassion, informed by integrity, bearing witness to the truth. As many of you know, I am a pro-life Democrat. I believe that life begins at conception and ends when we draw our last breath. And I believe that the role of government is to protect, enrich, and value life for everyone, at every moment, from beginning to end.

We must unite as a country, Democrats and Republicans, behind the understanding that the common good requires us to value all life. For 33 years, this issue has been used mostly as a way to divide people, even as the number of abortions continues to rise. We have to find a better way.

There have been times when members of my party have vigorously opposed me because of my position on abortion. And those of you with long memories can recall a dark night in 1992 when the national Democratic Party insulted the most courageous pro-life public official in our party who simply asked that those who believed in the right to life be accorded the right to speak. But things have changed over the ensuing 14 years. I have been encouraged to see Democrats in this new century becoming more open to people who are pro-life. The common good can be advanced by working towards common ground.

For example, pro-life Democrats in the House are on the verge of introducing legislation that would work toward real solutions to our abortion problem by targeting the underlying factors that often lead women to choose abortion. As a public official, I will continue to work within the party to ensure that Democrats are welcoming and open to such initiatives.

Abortion is clearly an important life issue, and as a Catholic, I understand that life extends beyond the womb. In my view, neither party has gotten it right when it comes to life issues. We can't realistically expect to tackle the difficult question of abortion without embracing the "radical solidarity" with women who face a pregnancy that Pope John Paul II spoke of many years ago.

If we are going to be pro-life, we cannot say we are against abortion of unborn children and then let our children suffer in degraded inner-city schools and broken homes. We can't claim to be pro-life at the same time as we are cutting support for Medicaid, Head Start, and the Women, Infants, and Children's program. I believe we need policies that provide maximum feasible legal protection for the unborn and maximum feasible care and support for pregnant women, mothers, and children. The right to life must mean the right to a life with dignity.

Service

It is this understanding that draws many Americans to another building block for the common good: service. The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. said: "Everyone can be great because everyone can serve." One of the greatest paradoxes of our faith is that it is in humbling ourselves in service to others when we are lifted up, and it is in giving when we receive. This is a complicated principle, but it is clearly something most Americans understand. Just ask the priest who runs the midnight basketball league in his community; or the woman who shows up every Saturday morning at the food kitchen; or the church community that builds Habitat homes. These people understand that their interests are served through the common good when they serve others.

That is the underlying principle of another kind of service, public service. One of the best statements on public service is inscribed on the building where I work in Harrisburg. "All public service is a trust given in faith and accepted in honor." A country that seeks the common good must have leaders who understand and honor that sacred trust. Yet sadly, our government has been plagued in recent years by corruption, the abuse of power, and politicians who put personal and political gain over what is best for America. Corruption is bad enough for what it costs from a financial and policy perspective, but worst of all, it erodes confidence in government.

The common good can never be achieved if we continue to allow our country's special interests to trump our moral interests. We must wipe corruption from the halls of government. To do that, we need leaders with the moral courage to match the courage of everyday Americans.

Community

Finally, the common good is about community. The common good for the entire human community summons us to take steps to counter the effects that human activity is having on all life on earth. We are called to be good stewards of God's creation, and America should stand as

an example to other nations of how we must protect Creation for future generations. The great statesman, Edmund Burke, put it well when he said, “history is a pact between the dead, the living, and the yet unborn.”

We have inherited Creation from those who came before us, and it will be one of the most tangible things we leave to our children and our children’s children. In the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the connection between the environment and the common good is expressed in our State Constitution. Since this is an audience of lawyers, I wanted to be sure to give you the citation. In Article I, Section 27, we read:

“The people have a right to clean air, pure water, and to the preservation of the natural, scenic, historic and esthetic values of the environment. Pennsylvania's public natural resources are the common property of all the people, including generations yet to come. As trustee of these resources, the Commonwealth shall conserve and maintain them for the benefit of all the people.”

After all, what could be more in the interest of the common good than clean air, fresh water, and a healthy and sustainable environment?

Our moral obligation to the common good and to building community is based on a fundamental belief that we are all in this together, we are our brother’s keeper, and a go-it-alone culture leaves us isolated, insecure, and morally bankrupt.

I greatly admire the words of Pope John XXIII -- for whom this lecture series is named. As he so eloquently expressed in his landmark encyclical Pacem in Terris, we cannot fully grasp the concept of the common good without looking beyond our borders and understanding that we are all part of a global community.

Pacem in Terris focused on peace, human rights, and the concept of the universal common good. It was written in 1963 for an extremely divided world. The Berlin Wall had been erected two years earlier, and just months before the world had come to the brink of a nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Many believed that humanity was condemned to live indefinitely in the precarious condition of “cold war,” praying that neither an accident nor an act of aggression would trigger nuclear annihilation.

I believe the lessons of Pope John still apply today. As we remember the fifth anniversary of the September 11th attacks this week, my thoughts keep returning to where we were on September 12th when the world had rallied behind us and every American was ready to make the sacrifices necessary to protect the country we love. We will long remember the sacrifice of firefighters, police officers, and other rescue workers who rushed into the burning towers. To be worthy of their sacrifice, or as Lincoln said, “their last full measure of devotion,” we should have united our country and the world around a common purpose. Instead, in the ensuing five years, some of our leaders continued to divide Americans from their fellow citizens, and isolate our nation from the rest of world.

As we remember September 11th this week, I believe our world is in dire need of the vision John XXIII offered for global cooperation in the pursuit of the common good. As he said:

“Each country's social progress, order, security, and peace are necessarily linked with the social progress, order, security, and peace of every other country. From this, it is clear that no State can fittingly pursue its own interests in isolation from the rest.”

For too long, we have failed to heed this prophetic wisdom. America's position in the world should be based on leadership, not brinkmanship; on hope, instead of fear. We will win the war on terrorism not by acting alone but in concert with our allies. As the greatest nation on earth, America's leadership in the international community must again be defined by how we unite Americans, and by how we show leadership abroad to confront the great global challenges of our time: the spread of terrorism and the need for international security; the plague of global poverty that brings suffering and death to billions of lives around the globe; stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS; and the dark threat to human life posed by global warming.

As history has proven time and again, an idea can ultimately be more powerful than any army or force of nature. As we fight the war on terror, our military must be made more robust: our troops must be better-armed, better-equipped, and better-led by their civilian leaders. We must confront the threat of terrorism with every weapon in the arsenal of democracy - military might, to be sure - and our diplomatic power, our political power, and our economic power as well. But as mighty as our military is, as efficient as our economy is, as creative as we would like our diplomacy to be, they are not what made America what Lincoln called "the last, best hope of the world." Our ultimate weapon is the moral force of America.

Although some say the war on terror will be a war without end, I disagree. We will win this war -- as we won the Cold War against Communist tyranny -- yes, because of our military might, and yes because of our economic and diplomatic leadership. But in the end, we won the Cold War, and we will win this war through moral force and by the strength of the idea that is America. Throughout our history, nations have followed our leadership abroad and our country has prospered at home because we have been a nation that has stood for and defended the common good. We must make America that place again.

I believe that we stand at a crossroads in history, much as our country faced forty years ago when Pope John XXIII wrote his great encyclical. Our nation is hungering for leaders who will call us to the service and sacrifice needed to make America what we know it can be. As Americans, we must challenge each other to give our time, talent, and treasure in service, so that we may realize the full potential of the gifts every single American has to offer this country we love, and ultimately this world of which we are all citizens.

So to the law students here today--as tomorrow's leaders--I ask you to seek the common good and help restore America's moral compass. We must recommit ourselves to affirming the human dignity of every individual and the belief that by helping those around us, we build a better world. For we can live up to our moral obligation to promote the common good only when we see the connection between our individual well-being and that of our neighbors', and

the connection between our national security and the security of all nations. That is an idea worthy of our sacrifice and the proud traditions of our nation and our faith.

Pursuing the common good will not be easy. It will not be the path of least resistance. It will not be the smooth road. But I have faith that, ultimately, we will complete this journey. When I look at the students here today and when I think back on the example of my parents, the struggles of the families in north Philadelphia, the resilience of the American people, I see the substance of the things we all hope for, and the even greater potential for our nation.

Our American sense of the common good has always been nurtured by an uncommon optimism as old as our Republic. As the Constitutional Convention in 1787 was concluding its work in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania's delegate, Benjamin Franklin, wondered whether a carving of the sun on the back of the President's chair depicted a rising or a setting sun. He would later say: "Now I have the happiness to know that it is a rising and not a setting sun."

As we look to our future here in the United States, as one family, always seeking the common good, let it be said of us that we acted with justice, spoke the truth, and cared for the vulnerable in the ever-rising sun of America's tomorrow.

Thank you.

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