



Secularism

Tenth Festival Letter of
✠Most Reverend Daniel R. Jenky, C.S.C.
BISHOP OF PEORIA

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There is a Latin word for this present time between the Lord's Ascension and his Second Coming at the end of time. That word is *saeculum* and indicates the temporal interval between what we *already* see and what we *do not yet* see, between what we *already* know and what we *do not yet* know. The *saeculum* is provisional, while the world that is to come is eternal. As the Scriptures teach, what is false, evil, and demonic in this passing world is destined to be utterly destroyed by the power of God whose judgements are final and whose rewards are everlasting. The Church's Liturgical Year with its ancient calendar of festivals and religious seasons deliberately interrupts and challenges a perception of time that pays little attention to eternity.

Faithful believers in Christ are called to boldly witness against the deceptions of the *saeculum*. Christians believe in a hope filled future rather than placing unqualified trust in structures of reality that are clearly racing to an end. Those who call Jesus Lord must always be ready to welcome a *breaking in* of the unforeseeable and eternal Kingdom of God. Those who affirm the resurrection of Christ already experience incomparable blessing, but they also know that the best is yet to come. The end will certainly surpass the beginning, as human existence will be redefined in the invincible grace of God.

Like Jesus himself, his disciples are called to be guided by the Spirit and place their entire trust in the Father. This faith in God offers clarity and insight. This faith gives significance to what is good and liberation from what is bad. This faith calls believers to live life fully, to serve generously, and to pray persistently. This faith can fill the present moment with a joy that cannot be taken away. This faith even gives meaning to times of testing and sorrow. This faith challenges believers, who themselves *know not the time nor the hour* (Matthew 24:36), to continuing conversion in expectation of a Judgement that may come at any moment, even tomorrow, even today.

Modern science confirms the scriptural conviction that just as each human life will certainly end, all things in this world will surely pass away. Recently there seems to be an ever

increasing chorus of scientific doomsday predictions that the earth is heading towards destruction. Descriptions of *not if but when* scenarios of falling asteroids, gamma ray bursts, mega tsunamis, mega earthquakes, mega volcanos, radical climate change, and worldwide pandemics fill both the popular media and even more serious works of investigation. Predictably, false prophets take advantage of these anxieties and the mass media sensationalizes their specific predictions.

National economies are also clearly in disarray, even while crass materialism continues unabated. Other aspects of human culture seem as well to be in precipitous decline. There is degeneration in the arts, debased entertainment, casual violence, a trivialized understanding of human sexuality, an attempt to deconstruct marriage and the family, infantile politics, and an enormous erosion of respect for human life. The world has always had its share of trouble and terror but despite enormous progress in science, medicine, communications, and many other good things, there are some modern evils that now seem to be spinning out of control.

Related to all these challenges is a growing enthusiasm for radical *secularization*. Historically this term was first used to describe the plundering of the monasteries in England under Henry VIII and was later used to describe the seizure of Church schools, religious houses, orphanages, and hospitals in France during the Reign of Terror. Perhaps even more significant than these and subsequent attempts to destroy God's Church has been an underlying determination by secularists to entirely exclude God from every aspect of public life and eventually from human consciousness. The secularists argue that man can only be supreme (without ever asking why man should be supreme) if God is not God, not *the* Supreme Being. A *no* to God is therefore perceived as a *yes* to man.

Following the lead of the great proponents of atheism like Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Sartre, some modern teachers have sought to describe the religious impulse as merely an expression of profound alienation such as economic injustice, simple fear, or sexual conflict. This same category of non believer often blames humanity's wars and woes on religion. The fact is, however, the greatest mass murders and misanthropes in history have been self-conscious atheists such as Hitler, Stalin, and Mao. Another example of secular maleficence would be Pol Pot who intellectually justified his horrific acts against his own people in Cambodia in terms of class warfare based on the atheistic dialectical materialism that he once studied as a student in Paris.

As social systems, nationalism, communism, and capitalism without moral reference to God have all justified their crimes against humanity in terms of competing theories of natural

selection and the survival of the fittest. The mechanics of brute nature, however, clearly cannot provide men and women with an adequate moral compass for a humane way of living. If man is just a chemical accident, a mere collection of neurons that has somehow produced a kind of clever monkey, then there really is no right or wrong and no intrinsic value to human existence.

All that remains in this nihilistic perception is basically self-absorption. The premier value becomes the so called pursuit of the self, often expressed in the modern proverbs: *Just do your own thing* or the more contemporary: *Whatever!* Interaction with others is increasingly defined by preference and appetite, and embraces only those goals that are personally chosen. With this understanding, there can be no such thing as absolute truth beyond a personal perception of utility based on the laws of cause and effect. When one is answerable only to one's self, ethical living basically is reduced to risk management. The completely unencumbered self really has no essential ties to a natural law, history, tradition, family, or community.

As Blessed John Paul II once observed with enormous prescience: "If the promotion of self is understood in terms of absolute autonomy, people inevitably reach the point of rejecting one another. Everyone else is considered an enemy from whom one has to defend oneself. Society becomes a mass of individuals placed side by side, but without any mutual bonds." (*Evangelium Vitae*, #20)

Today there is also a kind of sacralization of ideas such as environmentalism, feminism, vegetarianism, animal rights, neo-hedonism, market theory, and almost every conceivable variety of therapy. By rejecting the transcendent, there is a tendency to attribute absolute significance to mere fragments of truth. There is usually little room for the analysis of what is being posited, because any divergence is often regarded as a kind of heresy. Secularists in their pronouncements, both rightist and leftist, seem increasingly inflexible because their secular faith allows little or no room for doubt.

Saint Thomas Aquinas begins his extraordinary *Summa* with the great "question" of whether or not there is a God. In contrast, modern secular atheists tend to simply assert their "answer" that God could not exist. They apparently believe that truth can only be found in what can be measured, counted, or analyzed by the scientific method. Their faith in science alone, however, is grounded in what could only be described as a sophomoric understanding of mathematics, biology, physics, and cosmology. Their convictions rather obviously run counter to the symbolic, almost mystical language now widely used in the higher sciences to describe such possibilities as dark matter, dark energy, the implications of quantum mechanics, neutrinos, extra dimensions, crashing membranes, and parallel universes. Secularists seem preoccupied merely

with the details of reality rather than with any curiosity about its organizing meaning.

The wisest teachers of the Church have long pointed out that to say that God exists or does not exist are both erroneous assertions, because they try to force God to be like all other realities, and therefore not to be God. Logically the Supreme Being simply cannot be described in the same way as other beings. The brilliant Aquinas observed that conceptionally God is not a thing with properties or a substance with accidents, as in the case of everything else. All normal standards of understanding must be negated when speaking about God. (cf ST 3:6-7) His being is his essence. There is nothing in God that is not God himself. There really are no human words that can accurately refer both to the Creator and creation, not even the word *is*. God's nature suffers no restraints, except for that of his love, and there simply are no limits to his existence. For believers, any language regarding God must always recognize that God is the ultimate and inexhaustible truth from which all reality emerge and toward which all reality journeys.

By contrast, the fundamentalists among modern secularists just assert that all questions about God are meaningless because they cannot be subjected to their narrow definition of the scientific method. In science itself, however, there are observable singularities and apparently irrational elements in the very nature of space and time that should invite wonder rather than intellectual complacency. The fact is that there are all sorts of very real and even necessary things such as human play, poems, songs, humor, meditation, and stories that simply cannot be scientifically measured. The philosophical positivists, however, apparently rest in the security of the little they know and are entirely closed to the immensity of what they do not know.

Certainly the scientific method in and of itself is unable to provide a meaningful explanation for what could be called the essence of existence. As Albert Einstein once pointed out: "Religion without science is lame, while science without religion is blind." An openness to mystery and the concept of infinite truth far from being examples of irrationality have often been the impetus for seeking deeper meaning, new insight, unexpected discovery, enhanced understanding, liberating perception, and greater spiritual and even material progress. Recognizing the limitations of a moment in human knowledge has historically been an enormous impetus for change and renewal.

Determined secularists also seem to part company with the clear evidence that humanity seems *hard wired* to seek greater consciousness and persistently craves for transcendence. Human beings are very obviously social beings with an instinct for ritual, who flourish in community, and intuitively seek a kind of communion with the infinite. A sense of awe before nature, the creation of music, art, architecture, selfless love, noble values, philosophies,

theologies, exultation in worship, and especially the human capacity for wonder all have direct ties to a profound religious instinct in human nature. Pope Benedict XVI in his challenging lecture at Regensburg, observed: “The courage to engage the whole breadth of reason, and not the denial of its grandeur, this is the program with which a theology grounded in biblical faith enters into the debates of our time.”

Most sadly, it happens that our “local church,” the Catholic Diocese of Peoria, now exists in a political reality that is increasingly secular in outlook and today is often specifically hostile to the convictions of our Faith. Atheists and secularists have long realized that the Church of Rome is perhaps the largest single institution that still stands in the way of a completely secularized society. In Illinois where politics are notoriously corrupt and whose governmental agenda is so singularly ineffective, entrenched political power happens to be concentrated in a single region that for generations has been immune to reform. This situation has given determined special interest groups a unique opportunity to impose their views on everyone else as they endeavor to exclude faith from any role in the public forum.

For example, in the past year, in a state that is at least \$13 billion in debt, that has imposed a crippling increase in taxes, in a *lame duck* session of the General Assembly, a bill cynically entitled “The Illinois Religious Freedom Protection Act” was passed and signed into law. The bishops of Illinois were personally assured that the Church’s institutions such as Catholic Charities and Catholic health care would be exempted, as a reasonable accommodation such as was given in the states of New York and Rhode Island that around the same time also passed civil union legislation. In Illinois, however, these assurances were promptly disavowed when the state’s political leadership was threatened with financial retribution by persons and organizations basically operating out of Chicago. What would be unthinkable against the convictions of any other religious group in Illinois has apparently become acceptable against believing Catholics.

In the case of Catholic Charities, not the slightest consideration was given to the needs of those children whose quality of life was most at risk. Some of these young people have been so neglected or damaged that they could never be placed in family foster care. Instead they required the care of group homes on the campus of Guardian Angel Orphanage, where for over 100 years our Diocese has lovingly served those children most in need. The enormous disruption and awful pain of the most vulnerable apparently meant nothing whatsoever to the political leadership of our state.

Recently, some politicians have even begun to publically depreciate the unique

contribution that Catholic healthcare offers to people of every race, color, and creed, often in areas that would otherwise be seriously under served. It should be apparent to everyone who watches the news or reads the papers how often in Central Illinois the victims of crime or accident as well as the critical needs of babies and children are so generously and extraordinarily well served by Catholic healthcare. Catholic hospitals also bring the special gifts of faith, prayer, and community to the care of the sick. While it is true that these institutions are supported by insurance and governmental funds (if and when the State of Illinois ever bothers to pay its bills), it should be noted that they are sustained as well by the continuing sacrifice of congregations of Consecrated Religious, the Catholic faithful, and many diverse people of good will. If a voracious government wants even more tax revenue, it should certainly look elsewhere than to religious institutions manifestly engaged in public service for the sake of Christ and the common good. Under the Constitution and in a society that likes to think of itself as being pluralistic, the fact that Catholic healthcare is faith-based, pro-life, and pro-marriage, should not be allowed to justify what would basically be a determined political decision to eliminate this long established and widely appreciated ministry of our Church.

As your Bishop, I now believe it is critically necessary to raise an alarm among the faithful regarding growing threats to our religious freedom due to the increasing steps toward radical secularization taking place in Illinois. Beside the abrupt exclusion of Catholic Charities from childcare and adoption services and increasing attempts to intimidate Catholic healthcare, I am also concerned about possible future moves that could be made against the independence of our Catholic schools and other public ministries of our Diocese. Eventually it may come to pass that our fidelity to the Gospel of Christ and to Catholic tradition may place us in direct conflict with recent legal definitions of the State of Illinois. There are certainly some in our state whose commitment to aesthetic secularism is so intense that they may well try to restrict the Church's role only to the sacristy and sanctuary.

I am especially scandalized by some "Catholic" politicians who willingly collaborate with efforts to restrict the civil liberty of the faith tradition from which they were originally sprung. Many of those in office who were taught to read and write in Catholic schools, now seem entirely indifferent to the consciences of those Catholics who live their faith. On Ash Wednesday, they like to be conspicuous with crosses on their foreheads, but the true Cross of Christ seems far from their hearts and minds. They enjoy parties on March the 17th and wearing green sweaters but in effect are ashamed of Saint Patrick's unwavering zeal for the Catholic Christianity. They like photo opportunities with the hierarchy, but break their word to them without a moment's hesitation. They may still use the rituals of Catholicism to mark their happy and sad occasions, but apparently would sell their soul for a vote or a dollar. *What does it benefit*

a person to gain the whole world but lose their soul (Mark 8:36), but eternal loss for the sake of public office in Illinois is an extraordinarily foolish deal with the devil. Such people certainly need our prayers, but they should no longer be able to take our friendship or our support for granted.

In point of fact, I never have and never will tell the flock entrusted to my care which party or what candidates deserve their vote. The regions and political situations of our state are diverse, as are the strengths and weaknesses of members of both parties. It is also true that in contemporary Catholic thought, it is primarily the laity who should take the leading role in the political and economic arenas. Among religious groups, however, American Catholics have in recent decades become remarkably passive even in the face of relentless hostility from the media, the entertainment industry, and now from some politicians. Even when our institutions are attacked and our most sacred beliefs held up for scorn, many Catholics sadly remain silent. As your Bishop, it is therefore my duty before God to call faithful Catholics into more assertive action in defense of our religion and those public ministries which we hold to be the work of Christ.

Living in the *saeculum* has always meant that our fidelity to God will be tested. Earlier generations of Catholics in Central Illinois faced some measure of discrimination. The anti-Catholicism of those days, however, did not prevent our spiritual ancestors with very limited resources from building their parishes, convents, monasteries, schools, orphanages, and hospitals and even more importantly passing on the Faith undiminished to their children and their children's children. If other people either misunderstood or simply hated Catholic Christianity, those who went before us were never apologetic about what they believed or unstinting in defense of their Church. This is the received religious heritage that has so enormously gifted our lives and to which we should all continue to owe our absolute allegiance.

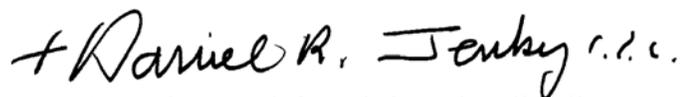
Today, however, loyal believers are called upon not only to defend the Faith but even to defend the very concept of faith in the face of aggressive secularism and increasingly intolerant atheism. It now seems to be the unbelievers who apparently hope to initiate some new kind of inquisition designed to entirely exclude God from the public forum. In the face of growing hostility, practicing Catholics need to recognize that the choices we make and the witness we either offer or withhold will have both temporal and eternal consequences for each one of us. Christ the Lord has promised that the *gates of hell* will not prevail against the Church he founded on the rock of Peter's faith (Matthew 16:1), but he also warned that at the end of time he will deny those who deny him (cf. Matthew 10:33). Catholicism is filled with enormous spiritual richness, a cohesive intellectual tradition, and a remarkable commitment to charity and service. It is the Faith for which we should be ready and willing to give our hearts and even to offer up our

lives. It is also the Faith by which we all certainly will be judged before the throne of Almighty God.

Given at my Chancery,

January 8, 2012

Feast of the Epiphany

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Daniel R. Jenky, C.S.C." with a small cross symbol at the beginning.

✠ Most Reverend Daniel R. Jenky, C.S.C.

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