



SPEECH

American Catholic Press Benefit

Alan Keyes

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Thank you very much.

I am especially honored tonight to be able to share a few thoughts with you, as we come together in honor of Sister Mary Paul, who has made such an extraordinary contribution to Catholic education. We are happy to gather in her honor, to the credit of her religious community and Marian High School itself. The Gratiam Dei Award is richly deserved tonight.

Being a product of Catholic education myself, I know how extraordinarily important it can be to one's life. The foundation that it lays is a permanent treasure.

Among other things, I benefited from Catholic education because it shapes heart and character in such a way that you never forget one fundamental truth. In our time, that reality has become more and more obscured. That is the truth that the real purpose of human life can never be summarized by material things, but only by what we become as a consequence of those choices of the moral will that constitute our acknowledgment of our Sovereign, God.

Perhaps more than anything else, my Catholic education and upbringing are what fundamentally have shaped my life, both personally and in public service.

As you know, we come together now, on a day when we commemorate the terrible attacks of September 11th. Though we don't often think it through, those attacks ought to challenge us, both as Americans and as people of faith. Those attacks ought to move us to remember this lesson that is shared with those who are truly influenced by Catholic teaching and Catholic education.

On September 11th, America was struck by great evil. The remarkable thing is that people actually recognized that fact. When the President stood up and declared that this evil should revolt the conscience of the world, nobody disputed it. Despite years of moral relativism, it didn't seem hard at that moment for most Americans to recognize the reality of evil and to call it by its right name. Most Americans reacted as if there was indeed a line to be drawn, in every place, in every clime, in every period, in every time, between what is right and what is wrong.

I wish, though, that we had done more reflecting on the exact nature of the evil that struck us. In the present moment, we are engaged in a great and terrible war that actually extends around the world. That war is directed against an evil that every now and again, with its heinous brutality, reminds us of its true characteristics, as it just did in Russia, recently.

Struck as we were on September 11th, we American people should need no reminder. We should be able to think through clearly just what lay at the heart of that evil which we all acknowledged.

Terrible as the September 11 experience was, there was a truth contained in it--one that belied much of the moral relativism that, sadly, has passed for sophistication in our time. Since we agreed upon it, and since the lesson is there, it behooves us to think about it: what was at the heart of the evil that struck America on September 11th?

If we look at the media accounts, we could be taken in by the notion that it was the terrible destruction, even the terrible loss of life. Certainly those things were grievous; the loss of life affected the heart of America deeply. Not only those who were directly touched were affected, those who lost family and friends, those who experienced the void. No, all Americans were affected. At that moment and in those hours and in those days, we grieved and wept and suffered and sought and triumphed with the heroism of those who were struggling against the odds to find in the midst of that disaster one more hope for life.

But it wasn't those things that constituted the evil of September 11th. It couldn't be. When all is said and done, terrible destruction can be wrought by a hurricane, by an earthquake. Great loss of life can result from those things. Buildings fall and people may die, by the thousands or even the tens of thousands. And yet we know that those events, terrible as they may be, despite all the grief and mourning that they can cause, they are not evil in the true sense of the term.

For I think we know that the Lord spoke true when He reminded us that evil is not what falls upon us from without. It is rather what rises from within the heart of human beings--and it is in the heart of the human beings who perpetrated September 11th that we must look for the true explanation, the true character of the evil that hit us that day.

What was it? Well, I think we can see it clearly, even in the instrument that they used: these planes that flew into the World Trade Center. At one level, you know that it was kind of a stroke of "strategic genius" from the terrorists' point of view. They took these ordinary instruments of our everyday life, and they turned them into sophisticated weapons: guided missiles that had at their helm the most sophisticated guidance system known, the human mind.

We might pause to think for a minute, "Why didn't we think of that?" Of course if we did reflect for a moment, we would know immediately why not. We wouldn't think of it, because we have been to airports; and we have flown on airplanes. We have sat in waiting rooms with crowds of schoolchildren, waiting to go to visit maybe Washington, or to play a game against some opposing team. We have sat on a plane, next to folks who might be grandparents, coming back from seeing their grandchild for the first time. Or perhaps we sat next to nervous business people, writing away on some proposal that could mean that big contract and a nice promotion. Nervous as these people are, we understand these things. We understand the hopes, we understand the fears, we understand the anxiety, we understand the nervous excitement of the young, we understand the nervous excitement of the teachers trying hard to control themselves, as they pretend to be bullet-proof. We understand these things.

And, you see, that's the problem, the difference between us and the terrorists who perpetrated the attacks against us. Because we have sat in the waiting rooms and flown on the planes, we know that, though they have powerful engines full of fuel that can be used for great destructive purposes, yet we could never look at those planes and see missiles. We would look at them and see and feel the people. Knowing that their hearts are like our hearts. And their hopes are like our hopes. And their dreams are like our dreams. And their loves, griefs are like our own.

Because we would know this, we would see these people as entitled to the very same life that we ourselves enjoy. To get where they're going. In peace. With no harm to their innocent lives.

That's what the terrorists didn't see.

They saw the power, they saw the fuselage, they saw the plane, they carefully calculated the destructive power. But they did not see the people. They did not see the real meaning of their worth and of their lives, as each and every one of them carries within them that little flame,

that little spark of God's divinity. And they did not respect it.

So, as we think it through, what lay at the heart of September 11th was a disregard for the claims of innocent human life. And this turns out to be the principle of the evil that struck us. It turns out as well to be the great cause, in the conflict that this nation is engaged in.

Yes it is a conflict, meant to prevent future loss of life. Above all, in its challenge to our conscience, in its challenge to humanity and civilization, it is a struggle to establish, once and for all, the respect that is owed even in war to the claims of innocent human life--lines that should not be crossed if we are still to claim for ourselves some semblance of decent humanity.

Whenever I go through that reasoning, though, I am afraid I am subject to a somber doubt. And that somber doubt arises because we did not first encounter this principle of evil on September 11th. It may have been the first time some people were willing to acknowledge its ruinous effects, the first time they saw that it could in fact lay low our civilization, the first time they understood in true terms the terrible death toll that could result. But it has been with us for a lot longer than that.

In America, all you have to do to see this principle of evil at work is to go down the street to any abortion clinic in any city, in any state, any county, and any town of America. There, you will see at work the same disregard for the claims of innocent human life.

I know that some folks came in for a lot of criticism shortly after 9/11 when they dared to use the J-word with respect to that day. People dared to suggest that possibly somewhere in 9/11 we should begin to read a word, a warning, perhaps, from the Lord our God.

But before we simply dismiss their words, it might behoove us to look at this parallel between the terrible blow the terrorists struck that had at its heart this principle of evil: a disregard for the claims of innocent human life. And the terrible blows struck every day and almost every hour in our own polity, when someone reaches into the womb where sleeps our innocent future, and snuffs out the life that by His grace, God has invited there--an act that has, at its heart, the same disregard for the claims of innocent human life.

When we think it through, it turns out that the evil that we fight is but the shadow of the evil that we do. And here's the rub, as Shakespeare would say, for America. For, when you are in the midst of terrible war, when above all you fight a war for the sake of a cause that requires that you distinguish good from evil, what could be more dangerous than a clouded and confused spirit, a clouded and confused judgment, a will divided against itself, knowing that those we hunt and may kill practice an evil that we ourselves countenance? And what they do, against strangers whom they declare to be representatives of evil on the earth--though it is hard for us to think of ourselves so--we do, against those who ought to be most precious to us, who ought to be most known to us, for they are flesh of our flesh and blood of our blood and bone of our bone and are our very selves united by the sacred grace of God in the new life that He has created through our acts and relationships.

When we think this through, we realize that our nation is in fact on the horns of a terrible dilemma. We stand on the edge of a terrible precipice. This danger can still be dispelled, but only if at some point we are able to understand that in this time, as in every time, the greatest dangers do not come from without. They rise from within. The heart that we must have to fight courageously against those who would threaten innocent life is a heart that we must cleanse of our own willingness to tolerate the destruction of that innocent life which has been entrusted by God to our special care.

I go through all of this, because we come together here to honor one who has dedicated her life and faith to a true work of education in the name of truth. And I've got to tell you that's a great work of charity in the truest sense. But don't you think that you and I, we owe that same kind of love to our fellow citizens and to our country? We often profess a love of sorts for the nation in which we live. But sometimes I wonder if we realize that there, too, we are obliged to love our country with a Christian heart and with a Christian love--and that the greatest gift that we can give to our world is not to feed them, not to clothe them, not even to

heal their flesh, but to share with them the wonderful truth that our Lord has shared with us, and to open their hearts, as ours are open to the grace and power of God.

We might think, "Oh, well, that's something we do for individuals-we can't do that for countries." But that's not true. For our nation was founded on the truth of God's authority: all men are created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. The Word is the very foundation of all our rights, all our institutions, all our public policy.

I think that as faithful people, it ought to be our vocation as citizens to be the ones who will bear witness to that truth, in every age, in every time, so that our nation will not lose its most precious possession--which is not its arms, and not its money, not the groaning fields laboring under the weight of wheat and corn; not the powerful industries, no. None of that. The greatest treasure that this nation has is that acknowledgment, from the beginning, of the sovereignty and power of God, that all our justice and all our liberty depend not on our will, but on His.

And that is why I think that whether we stand as people offering ourselves for public leadership or simply vote as ordinary citizens in the voting booth, we are obliged, by our conscience and our faith, never to leave behind our Lord. Never to make a choice, never to take an action, never to stand for a policy that does not affirm that which in our hearts we know to be the ultimate truth: that He is our Lord, that God is our God, and that as we walk the walk in this world of flesh, yet we must live in our hearts as citizens of His kingdom. And as citizens of His kingdom, we can share our love even as citizens, by standing with courage for what we know His love requires.

God bless you.

