

Challenges to Faith

The culture of the United States has been strongly influenced by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, or Age of Reason. That philosophy coincided with the scientific revolution and was based on the premise that reason and common sense should be our only guides. Its religious counterpart was Deism, which claimed that while God exists, he simply created the world and then left us to our own devices.

The founding fathers of our country were influenced by the Enlightenment and the promises of science. Though some were attracted to Deism, they supported freedom of religion and noted the value of religion for the stability of society and the moral order. In fact, they expected that faith would affect the social order.

Despite some major problems that the Church faced in this country, the Catholic faith grew and prospered here. But the early influence of the Enlightenment in this country's origins continues in unexpected ways and presents troubling issues for faith. The country's foundational principle of religious freedom, originally meant simply to preserve the independence and dignity of both church and state, has evolved into a "wall" of separation that seems to say that faith should have no impact on the state or society.

The Church, however, continues to apply principles flowing from her faith to public policy, most notably in her teaching on the dignity of the human person and the culture of life. The Church's advocacy for the poor, the elderly, children, and immigrants are further examples of the Church's commitment to advance social justice in America. The Church's unflinching pro-life stand is an outstanding example of calling our society and government to protect life from conception to natural death.

Deism, or at least a form of it, has been replaced by an ideological secularism, a belief that we are self-sufficient and self-explanatory and do not need religious faith. The Church's response to this ideological secularism is helped by joining with thoughtful people who are raising basic questions: Who are we? What is the meaning of suffering, evil, and death? Why has modern progress not eliminated them? What is the value of our country's achievements in light of their cost to human dignity and life?

These questions point us to the transcendent origins of humanity. The resulting discussion can awaken the seeds of eternity planted by God in each soul.

Finally, we need to affirm again our faith that Jesus Christ can show all of us the way—believers to stronger faith, and others to be brought to faith. When we are newly aware of the Holy Spirit's power to transform us and others, we will have both the energy and imagination to find paths to faith for those in need. We always need to rediscover the truth that the key to our history is to be found in Jesus, the Lord of history. Beneath all the rapid changes in our culture, there are



still many people who possess and live enduring values rooted in Christ, who "is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb 13:8). We need to rely on our faith in Christ

when we reflect on the mystery and dignity of man and woman, and as we address challenges to faith and its relationship to culture.