

# NO FINER TIME TO BE A FAITHFUL CATHOLIC

By Austin Ruse

Everyone knows there is a war going on in this country: a war on the Church, a war on religious believers, a war for souls, our individual souls and the soul of our country.

Our forefathers fought to guarantee a place where all religions were welcome. They shed their blood so that the state would hamper no Church, no body of believers. They fought so that all were free to worship in their own way; all were free to live their faith both privately and in the public square.

This fact of radical equality did not come from the state, but existed prior to the state. It is a right that comes from God that is supposed to be protected by the state.

We grew up believing we lived in a pluralistic society where Catholic, Protestant, and Jew, believer and non-believer stood equal before each other and equal before the state. It has not always been easy for this proposition. There have been dark times. We men have been less than perfect. All along though, we thought the state would be the guarantor.

Recent events have shown that this notion is now practically quaint. Not content with banning prayer in school, not content with chasing believers off public land, religious believers are now hounded by the state in their personal and professional lives. Religious believers are hounded out of jobs, hounded out of public ministries and even religious apostolates for not agreeing with the state. If the state gets its way, religious believers will be fined by the state.

We may no longer live in a pluralistic society because now it seems we live under an official state religion. This official state religion does not allow pluralistic disagreement where each of us is free to go our own way. This official state religion pushes upon us a new God, a jealous God, an angry God who insists that our children take their pills, read and recite their sexual propaganda, and joyfully accept their dogmas and that we should reach into our pockets and pay for the pleasure of it all.

You may think my message to you today is bleak, that we should despair, perhaps retreat behind gated faith communities and hold on desperately to the few morsels of religious practice left to us; that all that remains for us is hoping and praying for the best.

None of that is my message. In fact, I say this is time for rejoicing, as joyous as any time in the life of the Church. How blessed are we to be here now when everything seems lost. How blessed are we to be called by Him to defend His creation right here right now. We are as blessed as any generation of Catholics who have ever been called to defend Holy Mother Church.

Let's examine the battle today.

Note all of these issues I will cite are pointed directly at the two institutions the cultural Marxists want to destroy: the Church and the family.

- Abortion still takes 1.2 million unborn children a year.
- Pornography brings in \$10 billion a year and along the way destroys souls and families and children.
- Seventy percent of black children are born into homes without fathers. 40% of white children are born into families without fathers.
- Divorce destroys upwards of half of the marriages formed in the United States.
- And the recent Obergefell decision has now defined marriage not as something for the good of children but for the good of adults and that any configuration of relationships confers dignity.

If you disagree with this new model of marriage and if you act on this religious belief, you may lose your business, your house, your pension, and may even go to jail.

Catholic Charities in both Massachusetts and Illinois were forced to stop handling adoptions because they had a religious objection to handing children over to gay men. Before this happened they were promised that gay marriage would have absolutely no impact on anyone. They always promised that.

A wedding photographer in New Mexico was prosecuted because she refused to offer her artistic services to a religious ceremony that offended her own religious beliefs. A florist lost her business, her pension and her home for refusing the same request, even though she spent decades in business serving gay men, just not their weddings. The same thing happened to Christian bakers in Oregon even though there are dozens of other bakers to which the gay men could have turned.

Quite simply, there is an overall assault on religious freedom all across this country.

It's not just the various states that are in the business of punishing religious believers for wanting to live their faith. The Federal Government has gotten into this business in a very serious and dangerous way. A few years ago the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission—a program of the Federal Government—told a private and religiously run Benedictine College in North Carolina that it was in violation of federal law for not allowing contraceptive coverage for faculty members (presumably the faculty members who are not Benedictine monks).

This – and much else at the federal level – comes into greater focus when you know that the Obama administration quite ominously stopped referring to “freedom of religion” and began referring to what they call “freedom of worship”. There is a world of difference between the two. Freedom of religion is public. It refers to the freedom that religious people have to live their faith in the public square. Freedom of worship refers to something far different. It refers to what we may be allowed to do in Church on Sunday and that is all, or perhaps the Rosary said quietly in your own home. There is a world of difference between the two and a world removed from what our founders risked their lives, their fortune and their sacred honor for. They did not fight simply to pray in Church. They fought so that all men could pray anywhere and their faith could animate all aspects of their lives and the Federal Government had no say in the matter.

But each of the cases above referred to either state government action or Federal action taken against a single person or institution.

Something exponentially different has happened recently, something that upends our basic understanding of religious liberty but also something that upends our understanding of the state and its relationship with civil society.

The Federal Government has determined that it alone has the power to decide what a religious institution is, and what a religious activity is. Moreover, those who oppose these governmentally approved definitions and activities face severe penalties, in some cases running into the millions of dollars. The Administration has ordered all employers who provide health insurance, and all health insurance plans, to provide free coverage for contraception and drugs that kill unborn babies. The Administration allowed for a religious exemption but then decided the Secretary of Health and Human Services alone had the power to determine what qualified as a religious institution. Consider this very carefully.

In their rather crabbed view, their definition includes only actual Churches or those non-Church institutions that hire only their co-religionists and only ministers to their own co-religionists.

What this means, in plain language, is that a hospital administered by the Catholic Church that hires Jewish doctors or treats Protestant patients is not considered a religious institution. Notre Dame University, a sometimes imperfect, but still a Catholic institution, is defined as non-Catholic by President Obama and has been ordered to pay for contraceptives and abortifacients.

Professor Carter Snead of Notre Dame Law School has said, “The vanishingly small ‘religious employer’ exception tells us a great deal about how the White House misconceives religious practice. Notice how *private* this conception is limited to sectarian activities that involve only co-religionists. There is no space in it for the living of fully integrated lives, with faith permeating every aspect of human activity.” Snead goes on, “But being and

acting in the world as a witness and servant to others, *all others*, regardless of their beliefs, circumstances, or station in life is an indispensable aspect of many faiths.” As William Cardinal Keeler once said, “We don’t educate the poor students of inner city Baltimore because they are Catholic. We educate them *because we are Catholic.*”<sup>1</sup> But in the crabbed view of Barack Obama and Kathleen Sebelius, this is not Catholic at all.

This has been widely called the greatest threat to religious liberty in the history of our country. Who is the government to tell us what is Catholic or not? It is none of their business. It says so in the Constitution but even more importantly, it says so in the Law of God.

Yuval Levin, writing in National Review, points out another grave problem with the order of the Obama Administration. He says “What is at issue...is not just the question of religious liberty but the question of non-governmental institutions in a free society.” He asks, “Does civil society consist of a set of institutions that help the government achieve its purposes as it defines them..., or does civil society consist of an assortment of efforts by citizens who band together in pursuit of mutual aims and goods as they understand them? Is it an extension of the state or of the community?”<sup>2</sup> We can see the open hostility to conservative groups by the IRS and understand Levin’s concern that the Administration wants to clean out civil society, allowing only those groups willing to be agents of the state and punishing those that will not.

It is clear who and what is the real target here.

William Gavin writes, “The radical Left in every country in which it has gained power or influence, ever since the French Revolution, has wanted to dismantle, destroy, marginalize, or make impotent the Roman Catholic Church.”<sup>3</sup> And make no mistake, most, if not all, of this deadly aggression is aimed at the Catholic Church. The Church is the only institution that has stood solidly foursquare against the agenda of the sexual left. The Church has never wavered even once on abortion. The Church has never wavered even once on marriage and the family. The Church, while not seeking to impose its teaching on any man, has provided a prophetic witness to the dangers inherent in contraception. And, the Church is the world’s leader in proclaiming and defending freedom of religion.

So you see friends, we fight for the soul of our country and fight also for the Body of Christ. Arrayed against us are all the great powers of our time: the Federal Government and all its terrible might; the major news media that will spend thousands of hours and millions of dollars to convince us the Church is merely against sexual pleasure. Arrayed against us are rich men and women, rich foundations, the entertainment industry, and powerful non-governmental organizations including the federally funded, billion dollar-a-year baby-killer called Planned Parenthood.

There are many horrific challenges in the current crisis. We are relatively few in number and our opponents are vast and rich and powerful. But, there is good news, too. We are promised by our faith that God can bring good out of any evil. What possible good can God bring out of the longstanding attacks on the unborn child and attacks to undermine marriage and the family? What possible good can God bring out of the current governmentally initiated attacks on freedom of religion?

Well, for one, the great coming together of His children.

What we have seen over the past quarter century is something we have not seen since the great rupture of Christendom, the great splitting of Christian faithful during the Protestant Reformation. If God could feel pain, the pain of that split might be the greatest of all, for He wants all of His children to be one.

And what we have seen over the past quarter century is the great coming together of his Christian children. Catholic, Protestants, Evangelicals, and Mormons are putting aside our theological and ecclesiological differences in ways that we have never seen. We are putting aside our differences and banding together to fight back against the new state religion, the new state god. We are working together to protect the unborn child, to protect marriage and family and indeed to protect the right each of us has to practice our faith in our own way.

In my own pro-life and pro-family work at the UN, I work extremely closely not just with Catholics and Evangelicals, but other faiths, too, because we see a greater danger to ourselves than we see coming from each other. We see a war against God's creation and all God's children must work together to protect His creation.

What we all have in common, I will point out, is that we are all strong believers. I find that I have more in common with a hard-nosed Calvinist than I do with a dissenting Catholic. I am proud to work with those who believe I am not only theologically wrong, but damnably wrong, and I would have it no other way. I can count on a strong believer, even one who believes differently than I do.

Make no mistake that God wants abortion to end. He wants the slaughter of the innocents to end. He wants marriage restored in the way he made it. He wants us all to be able to discover Him and proclaim Him free from the interference and coercion by the state. But what He wants even more than all these things is for His children to be one and eventually to be with Him in Heaven. This is not a call to indifferentism. It does not say that all roads to God are the same, not at all. I am a faithful Catholic and believe the Church is not just the One True Church, but really, the only Church. I am not afraid to say that to my brothers from other faiths in this fight. In fact, I once told a room full of senior Muslim diplomats that God wants all of them to become Catholic. They sat there and grinned ear to ear! So, my call is not for indifferentism. It is a call in the present fight to put aside our arguments about religion and fight together against a common foe who is coming for us all.

If we do this right, we know the following will happen. We will grow closer. We will become friends. Understanding and sympathy will grow. Love will appear like those little flowers in the front yard when spring first arrives. This, my friends, is the true ecumenism; people of strong faith working on common projects and letting love grow. And I might add, this is an approach that is leading to unprecedented conversions to the Catholic Church, which I will point out again is the only religious institution in the world that has never wavered, not once, in defense of the unborn child and the natural family. This becomes evident to all we work with and is a remarkable attraction to those seeking the ultimate truth.

What we see in this grand alliance of Catholic and Evangelical is something quite interesting. We see Evangelicals coming to understand our natural law philosophy. No longer do Evangelicals rely exclusively on scripture to make their case. They are becoming conversant and articulate the unique Catholic way of philosophy and public argumentation. At the same time, Evangelicals are teaching us how to be, well, more Evangelical in the expression of our faith. We are more courageous in expressing our faith in overtly religious terms. We are more courageous in citing scripture, and in publicly proclaiming our faith. One of the great blessings of this land is that we have remained as religious as we are. We look at Europe and see a largely dying faith. Here there is robust faith. I believe we as Catholics owe a debt of gratitude to our Evangelical brothers and sisters for proclaiming the faith bravely in the public square, on television and even on the street corner. It has kept the faith on the boil in this land and may be the thing that saves us in the end. In short, there is much to be gained for us and for our land in banding together with other strong believers who may not share our Catholic faith.

The other quite amazing thing that has happened in the past few years is a great awakening of our Catholic Bishops. A few years ago, when John Kerry—a Catholic—ran for president, I asked papal biographer George Weigel how many bishops could be counted on to speak out publicly about Kerry and his dissents from Church teaching. Weigel said, "no more than 35." And that turned out to be true.

A few years passed and President Obama was invited to speak at Notre Dame and to receive an honorary degree. This has proved to be a watershed event for our Bishops. For that 35 grew to eighty Bishops who spoke out in opposition.

And now comes the great attack on our religious freedom and an issue in this case that touches on that great third rail of Church teaching, contraception. And guess what. Every single Bishop who leads a diocese in the United States has condemned it and then some. More than 200 bishops in all have condemned the contraceptive mandate. This is unprecedented in modern times. Many have vowed to go to jail rather than comply with this unjust law.

As William Gavin writes, “Who, after all, would have believed the Catholic Bishops, old, celibate men, their authority weakened by the manner in which they dealt with the homosexual sex scandal, scorned by the major media, not listened to by the vast majority of Catholics concerning the Church teaching on contraception – who could imagine that these...these... *people*...would say “No!,” not once but twice, to the Imperial Self?”<sup>4</sup> It was not supposed to be this way. The Bishops were supposed to be cowed into silence hoping that one day their moral authority would be restored. It has not turned out this way. And what a glorious time it is to be a Catholic.

Many of us may suffer from nostalgia. We may long to have lived in another time in the world, another time of the faith. We may look back and longingly see religious processions through the streets. We may look back and see a time when everyone professed the faith or the faith was respected by all. We may long for the 1950s. We may long for the middle ages. But I say this: Now is the time to be a faithful Catholic. There never was a finer time. It is the time God called us to. He called us to no other. And it is a time of profound danger.

Looking at all the trouble around us, looking at all the powers arrayed against us, looking at our small numbers, one is tempted to emulate Lot’s wife, who stared so intently at the evil around her that she was frozen, unable to move, turned to salt. We may be so tempted to look intently at these vast problems of our world and of our Church and decide pull the covers over our heads and not get out of bed except to work, to shop, and play golf.

I look at all of this and say: Never has there been a finer time to be a faithful Catholic!

Why? Because all of us are so very needed. We cannot spare even a single one of us and therefore what a blessing it is for us to be here now. The good Lord has given each of us specific tasks to carry out. These tasks were ordained for us since the beginning of the world. If we do not carry them out, they fall to another or, more likely, go undone. And so it is left to us, to faithful Catholics, to work at our tasks and to those that others have abandoned.

I travel all over this country and to points overseas, and wherever I go I see catastrophe. But wherever I see catastrophe, I also see faithful Catholics right there working to fix them. Whether it is defending the faith or defending the faithful or any and all others, good Catholics are there.

Our own Catholic Church administers more hospital beds than any other institution in the world. Catholics care for more AIDS patients than any other group in the world. To name only a few: it is Catholics like Robby George of Princeton, and Maggie Gallagher of the National Organization for Marriage, Brad Wilcox of the University of Virginia, and Ryan Anderson of the Heritage Foundation leading the intellectual fight to save traditional marriage.

It is our own Church that has been the lone institutional bulwark standing up for the unborn. On the day Roe v. Wade was handed down, the Southern Baptist Convention issued a statement praising the decision. Our Church has never wavered on this issue – what John Paul the Great called the most pressing human rights issue of our time.

One could go on and on with abundant examples of Catholics seeing the manifold evils of our time and acting, not waiting, but acting to fix them. For doing good, we live in the most target-rich environment the world has ever known. I look up and see haloes hanging from the lowest branches of the trees. All you need to do is reach up and grab one.

John Paul the Great called each one of us to be among these defenders of the faith and of the faithful. During the whole of his magnificent Pontificate, his central message to young people, indeed to each of us, is that we must strive for the greatness of heart, and never to settle for mediocrity. The great Father Richard John Neuhaus put it best when he said we must dare to live the high adventure of Catholic orthodoxy. And in this troubled time, that means so much more than private piety, going to Mass, saying your Rosary. It means these things to be sure, but it means so much more. It means engaging in the public struggle. This is a Cup that none of us may forego. It means manning the bedpans at hospices and the prayer lines at abortion clinics. It means

feeding the hungry and lobbying the state capital in defense of traditional marriage. There is so much to be done and there are so few of us.

But our models for this are all around us because we have also lived in a time of great Saints. There is no need to long for previous times where Saints walked the globe. We live there now. I think of Padre Pio; imagine, we lived when he lived! I think of Mother Teresa, Josemaría Escrivá, and Gianna Molla. We lived in the time of John Paul the Great. This is the time of great saints!

And we have lived in a remarkable time for the Church.

We see the birth and growth of new and orthodox lay movements in our church. They are bristling with growth. We see new, orthodox, and fully habited religious orders; new and vibrant Catholic colleges, high schools, and grade schools. We see new Catholic newspapers and magazines sprouting like mushrooms.

And if we look at the past few years in the Church, I think we see things that previous ages would look at with envy. Indeed, seen altogether and with the right eyes, these past few years are enough to take away the breath of faithful Catholics. I suggest we have not seen anything like what happened in these past few years.

This exercise could begin at the time of the Second Vatican Council, but we will start more recently, with that horrible time in 2002 – the time Father Neuhaus called the “Long Lent” – our public and painful suffering related to sexually aberrant priests. We must know that even those awful crimes can be turned to good by the Holy Spirit who is always with us. Father Groeschel assured us then that the Holy Spirit would work in the hearts of young men precisely at that time, and that they would increase the numbers of good, repeat *good*, seminarians in the months and years to come. And we know that it is already happening.

But even then the Holy Spirit was working for within a year of those awful events what did we see? Do you remember? We saw the release of Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ*. Don’t ever forget what an event that movie was. I was in a New York hotel room on that Ash Wednesday when it was released and every single television station was talking about it. Every single talking head and newsman was talking about not just the movie but the actual Passion of Our Lord. Now, this was a broadly Christian event but let’s be blunt; it was a uniquely Catholic vision. After all, it was the Stations of the Cross and it showed the supernatural relationship between Our Lord and Our Mother Mary. This was a global Catholic event that sent people to Confession, to Mass and some even to admit crimes before magistrates they had committed years before.

But that’s not all, for within only a few months of that powerful movie came the most unlikely event. The Presidential election came that saw a self-proclaimed pro-choice Catholic running for the highest office in the land. During that campaign we witnessed a national and even international debate over the duties of the Catholic voter. But more than that, we witnessed a national debate about proper reception of the Holy Eucharist. Do you remember that? The Holy Eucharist was the center of our national debate. No matter where one stood on pro-choice politicians taking Communion, the debate was edifying because it brought the meaning of the Eucharist before a national and even a global audience. I do believe we have never seen anything like this before.

And almost before we could catch our breath we saw the beginning of the final suffering of our beloved Pope John Paul the Great. Do you remember when the whole world gathered under his window at the Gemelli hospital and then the whole world seemed to follow him back to St. Peter’s Square and then waited with him, under his window, prayerfully, as he showed us how to suffer and then how to die. We waited silently by television and radio all over the world for the final word. I was on retreat in rural Virginia and many of us gathered around my car with the doors open and the radio on waiting for the news. And when the time came, people of all faiths raised their voices in praise and prayer for this good and great man. This was a global event. Millions filed through St. Peter’s Square to view his body. Hundreds of thousands dropped whatever they were doing and went to Rome, with no place to sleep, and no plan but to thank Our Holy Father. Hundreds of millions watched this remarkable event on television. The whole world watched.

And then, and then... The whole world stayed around to see who the next Pope would be. Part of the legacy of John Paul the Great is that he was not just the Pope of our Church but he was the Pope of the world. Did any of you notice that even our Evangelical friends felt they had a stake in the new Pope? And when the white smoke rose and the bells rang, a few hundred thousand ran to the square, and hundreds of millions ran to their television sets when it was announced, "Habemus Papem, we have a Pope!" The whole world celebrated together.

And within a few years of that blessed event, we had a national debate over health care. And what did we see? We saw the Church's teaching on abortion in the middle of the debate. We saw the Church stand toe to toe with the powers of the earth and demanded that abortion not be a part of this bill. And here we are a few years later and we see the present battle pitting Holy Mother Church almost alone against the powers of the world.

And almost before we know it, Benedict resigns and the news rattles not just our Catholic world but the world over. And this was followed by the election of new Pope whose every utterance lands on the front page of every newspaper around the globe.

Look at the meeting of Bishops in Rome – a usually remarkably boring Synod – that was covered by every major news outlet for what happened inside that meeting and what would come next. Have we ever seen a time like this when the whole world watched so intently and for so long our Holy Catholic Church? We are living in one of the most remarkable epochs the Church has ever seen. Do not miss it!

Arnold Toynbee wrote many years ago that we had come to the very end of the spiritual capital built up through what was known as Christendom. He said we awaited an age yet to be born. John Paul the Great said this new century would be a great Christian century, a great springtime of the faith hinting at glorious seasons to come. And this is the new age waiting to be born. You and I will not live long enough to see the flowering of this great age. You and I live in one of those odd times, between ages, on the cusp of something new and wonderful.

And this is what will happen. When Catholics in that age look back upon us, they will look back with great envy. You need not be envious for times past in the Church, for your ancestors will long to have been here with us in these difficult times, when troubles close in all around us, when there were so few of us to fight back, times of great danger and great fermentation of the faith, times of great saints and spiritual giants, times where each faithful Catholic, each one of us was so badly needed. Ladies and gentlemen there is no finer time to be a faithful Catholic than right now.

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<http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/291180/obama-athanasius-and-bishops-william-f-gavin>
4. Ibid.