

Members of the Pennsylvania Senate and House, legislative staff, members of the Judiciary, my brother Knights of Columbus on behalf of the Catholic Bishops of Pennsylvania and the PA Catholic Conference board members and staff, I thank you for taking time out of your very busy schedules to join us here this morning for our biennial Legislative breakfast.

To paraphrase Mark Twain, I didn't have time to write a short speech, so I wrote a long one instead.

I'm only kidding. I plan to be brief so that we have time for more fellowship and conversation.

As you know, American Catholics, and many other people of good will, are still contemplating the effects of Pope Francis's historic visit to our country and our Commonwealth last month. In some sense we have

been stirred from any complacency and given clear guidance from our Holy Father to go out and become agents of change in our society.

This transformation will occur in our homes, which Pope Francis asked us to make “factories of love.” At the Mass on the Ben Franklin Parkway, Pope Francis said, “Love is shown by little things, by attention to small daily signs which make us feel at home. Faith grows when it is lived and shaped by love.” Pope Francis encourages us to love radically, starting in our own homes.

Further, some of the areas of change Pope Francis called for are ones that also require legislative action: helping the poor, the respect for all human life, care for God’s creation, safeguarding religious freedom and concern for immigrant families, just to name a few. Indeed, the Holy Father gave us much to consider and to work towards in the months and years to come.

As Bishop of Harrisburg, I’m often at the Cathedral of St. Patrick on State Street, just a half a block away from the Capitol. (By the way, you

are all welcome to come to Saint Patrick's and pray there any time!)

The cornerstone of the original church on that site was laid by Irish laborers in 1826. The style of architecture was modeled after the great churches of Rome, and I remember when I first entered the Cathedral I was truly taken by its beauty. The stained glass windows depicting Jesus's life and ministry, the apostles painted in the towering dome, and the massive organ lovingly built by Pennsylvania artisans all captured my attention and directed my thoughts towards God.

But over time and after dozens of visits to the Cathedral, I've become used to seeing these images. Sometimes I deliberately have to remind myself to admire their magnificence and ponder their meaning.

Similarly, each of you walks into a magnificent "office" every day. The Pennsylvania Capitol building is rightly considered one of the most beautiful in the nation. The Capitol dome was inspired by Michelangelo's design for St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Perhaps, like me, the beauty and detail of the building, chosen for specific reasons by the

architect and artisans who created it, fades into the background as you enter and walk through the building time after time after time.

Today I'd like to draw your attention to a few of the features of the Capitol that may be overlooked because of repeated exposure.

Walking up the steps of the building, for example, an inscription in the stone reminds us that "In God we trust." That is the perfect prayer to start the day.

In the main rotunda, you'll see a mural painted by Edwin Austin Abbey entitled "The Spirit of Religious Liberty" showing William Penn's ships coming to the New World. On those vessels were believers who fled their homeland seeking the freedom to practice their faith both publicly and privately without government interference. Another of these murals, "Spirit of Light," shows women carrying flames against the backdrop of oil derricks. It is said the light of Pennsylvania depicted in these murals is not only the literal light produced by oil, but also the

light that our foundational principle of religious freedom offers to the world.

In the Supreme Court chambers, sixteen elaborate paintings by Violet Oakley also offer us a commentary on religion in the public square. The painting entitled “Divine Law” tells us that love, law, and wisdom are pillars to governing. Paintings also depict Moses receiving the 10 commandments, Jesus Christ preaching the beatitudes, and Christ walking on water.

Similarly, Pope Francis’s visit was also full of images that will stay with us for a lifetime, like the photograph of Pope Francis embracing inmates at Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility, Pope Francis praying at Ground Zero among leaders of all different faiths, and hundreds of thousands gathered on the Ben Franklin Parkway for Mass. Through these photos, Pope Francis showed us the Gospel in action, how to care for the needy and how to work together for the common good. This extraordinary man with hundreds of thousands of people waiting for

him directed his driver to stop the car so that he could greet and bless a young boy in a wheelchair. That moving image of the Pontiff embracing the young man gives us a compelling image of a spiritual ideal: love.

And it makes me ask, when was the last time I showed that kind of love and compassion to a stranger?

At first viewing, these images stir emotions in our heart and even inspire us to action. But over time, we may no longer be stirred to action by their inherent message. Art and imagery, which we overlook in our hurry from one meeting to another, can communicate the founding principles of our Commonwealth and our society. These images, this priceless art, make the invisible or imperceptible become reality before our eyes.

And what is the picture of the Church in our Commonwealth? There are over 3 million Catholics in Pennsylvania publicly living out our faith in a variety of ways. Catholic health care facilities serve over 3 million people of all faiths every year. Our Catholic charities agencies offer

services to hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvanians of all faiths or no faith each year, through food banks, emergency shelters, transitional housing and clothing drives. Our Catholic charitable outreach also helps immigrants and refugees, and our counseling services assist families, those struggling with addiction and those with mental health issues. Over 1,000 parishes across the state serve the local communities and provide a spiritual home for young and old alike. Our over 500 Catholic schools allow more than 140,000 students, both Catholic and non-Catholic, to grow in wisdom and grace each year. These ministries answer Jesus' call to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the imprisoned.

The religious freedom depicted in the art around the Capitol allows these Catholics to be active in their communities, living out their faith every day and providing a benefit to all Pennsylvanians, not only those who consider themselves religious.

Christians in Pennsylvania are answering the mandate of the Gospel when they live out their faith in the public square, when they take their faith beyond the walls of the church and into the community.

Christians are not alone in this – we know of the good work of our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters who also live out their faith in the public square. At the local level, all faith groups, as well as people who consider themselves agnostic or atheist, work hand-in-hand to help those in need. Laws that hinder a religious person’s ability to be him or herself force those of us with religious beliefs to violate our convictions.

Pope Francis pointed out the importance of publicly practicing faith. He said, “Religious freedom is not just a matter of thought or private devotion. It is the freedom to live – both privately and publicly – according to the ethical principles that are a consequence of the truth found.”



In Washington, D.C., Pope Francis said, “American Catholics are committed to building a society which is truly tolerant and inclusive, to safeguarding the rights of individuals and communities, and to rejecting every form of unjust discrimination. With countless other people of good will, they are likewise concerned that efforts to build a just and wisely ordered society respect their deepest concerns and their right to religious liberty. That freedom remains one of America’s most precious possessions. And, as my brothers, the United States Bishops, have reminded us, all are called to be vigilant, precisely as good citizens, to preserve and defend that freedom from everything that would threaten or compromise it.”

William Penn would agree with Pope Francis’s comments. As some work to remove God and faith from the public square, they would remove the very inspiration and foundation of our state and our culture. Our Commonwealth’s founding on the principle of religious liberty is well known, and the art that you walk by every day in the

capitol reinforces that standard. The photographs from the Papal Visit showed the varied and important ways faith influences society. I ask you, in your role as leaders of men and women, and shapers of society, to work to strengthen our foundation of religious freedom. I ask you to pass laws that allow for people of faith to answer the call of the Holy Father to be agents of change in society. Let us all rise to the ideal set by these images, which herald the important role of religion in the public square.

Thank you, and may God bless you, your families, and your vital service to the Commonwealth.