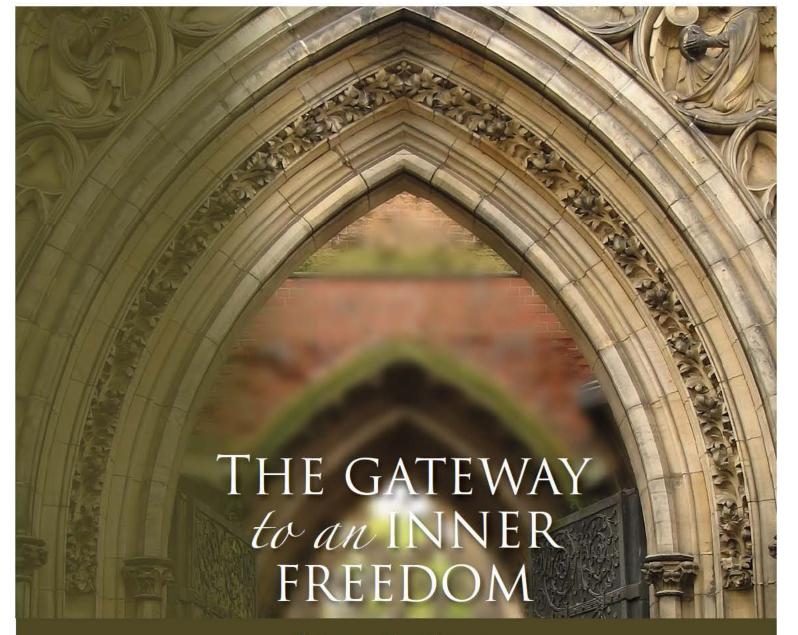
# A time for choosing So this is a time for choosing choosing whether as Catholics we will stand together to keep open the doors of religious liberty. If we do so, then... that will bring us closer to building that culture of life and that civilization of love about which John Paul II so often spoke. May we, like Blessed John Paul II, be not afraid in our choosing. - Carl A. Anderson, Supreme Knight, Knights of Columbus SISTERS OF LIFE



#### that cannot be taken away

As I write you today, we are having an "All-American barbeque" to celebrate with one of our dearest friends the realization of a dream -- 22 years in the making – of becoming an American! After being granted citizenship, the judge invited her to participate fully in the freedoms which are the blessings granted to every citizen of this nation. The irony was inescapable, in the context of the current threats to religious liberty in our beloved country.

These threats to 'our first and most cherished freedom' awaken us to a new reality; stir to life a dread within our hearts at the direction our Nation has taken; and ultimately lead to the question: "Who am I?" And with that most fundamental question, a deep memory is roused of the truth that God has created me for freedom.

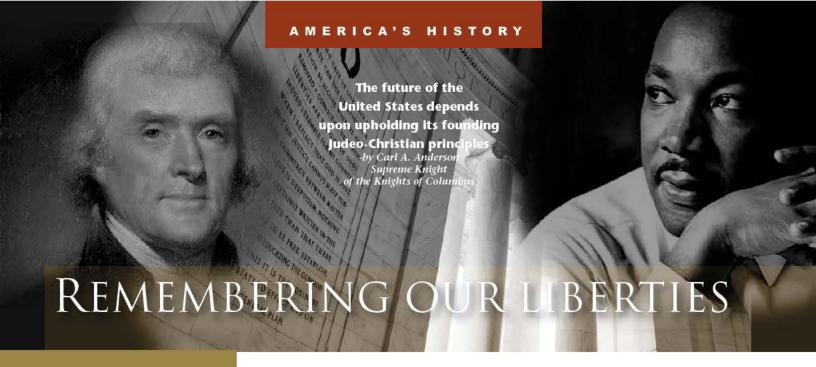
The freedom you and I seek is, most profoundly, that freedom given us by God that we may choose to love, and to follow the way of transformation in Jesus Christ

allowing ourselves to become a total self-gift to another. We grow in this most precious freedom by loving others (in the words of Mother Teresa) "until it hurts." As we love we grow in our capacity for love and freedom. Any restriction upon our ability to live our faith in full freedom is an infringement upon our freedom to flourish as human persons.

I pray your life will be a compelling sign of contradiction. Whatever the outcome on the national scene, this call to a living, vibrant faith will allow us to live at peace amid the tensions and currents; and will prepare us to live honorably and with fidelity in every circumstance. It is Jesus Christ, and Him alone, who is "my rock and my salvation." Indeed, this is who we are.

In Christ, Our Life,

Mother Agnes Mary, SV



Is this historical

Christianity and liberty

an accident of history,

or is it something

fundamental?

**Our Founders** 

answered that

question unequivocally.

They declared that

The following are excerpts from the remarks given by Supreme Knight Carl A. Anderson of the Knights of Columbus on April 19 at the 8th annual National Catholic Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C.

We offer thanks for the blessings of American liberty, a freedom that, in its extent and its endurance, is unique in human history. We also affirm our determination to preserve that liberty, for us and for our fellow citizens,

and to ask the Lord's guidance in doing so. There are times when we need that help more than others. This is such a time. I venture to say that never in our lifetimes has the religious liberty of the American people been as threatened as it is today.

#### Our country founded upon faith in God.

Of some things, we should not need to be reminded. There are some truths and some historical realities that should not need repeating. But in today's society, and in this year's official Washington, we must repeat them. We must remind our fellow Americans, and especially those who exercise power, that religious liberty — the freedom guaranteed by the First Amendment — has been essential to the founding, development and improvement of the American Republic.

we are "endowed" Alexis de Tocqueville observed the profound conby our "Creator" nection between religion and liberty in our national with inalienable life: "Religion does not give [Americans] their taste for rights. freedom," he said. "It singularly facilitates their use of it." We may ask: Is this historical connection between Christianity and liberty an accident of history, or is it something fundamental? Our Founders answered that question unequivocally. They declared that we are "endowed" by our "Creator" with inalienable rights.

#### The Rights of Man, The Gift of God

George Washington's Farewell Address insisted that religion and morality are "indispensible supports of our political prosperity," warning that "reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can be retained without religion." And John Adams asserted, "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any

other." Those views have echoed down through our history perhaps most notably in 1961 when President John F. Kennedy, in his Inaugural Address, spoke of the rights for which our "forebears fought," namely "the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God." According to a poll we conducted for the 50th anniversary of that speech, 85 percent of Americans still agree with Kennedy's statement.

This belief was also the driving force behind the life's work of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. In his historic Letter from a Birmingham Jail, Rev. King said that he and his followers

"were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democconnection between

racy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence." But perhaps we do need to be reminded that King's letter relied upon our own Catholic natural law tradition. He cited St. Augustine that "an unjust law is no law at all." And he asked, "How does one determine when a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law." He then went on to

say, "To put it in the terms of Saint Thomas Aquinas, an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law." There you have the ancient teaching of the Catholic Church summed up by a Baptist preacher under arrest for living by it.

When you visit the new memorial to King on our national mall, read carefully the 14 quotations inscribed there. You will not find a single reference to God. Not one. Imagine how those in authority must have searched to come up with 14 quotes of Rev. King without one mention of the Almighty. There is no more shocking symbol of the ongoing campaign to drive religion out of our public life. King's statue looks across the Tidal Basin to the Jefferson Memorial, dedicated to

the president who is now championed by secularists for inventing a "wall of separation" between church and state. Ironically, while the King Memorial was scrubbed of any reference to our Creator, in Jefferson's memorial, the walls tell us, "The God who gave us life, gave us liberty." And they ask us, "Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God?" A great deal hinges on how we answer that question.

#### **New Intolerance of Religion**

In 1954, the Knights of Columbus was instrumental in having Congress place the words "under God" in the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance. Those words were placed in our pledge in part to mark a stark contrast between the ultimate source of our rights and the pretensions of the atheist totalitarian dictatorships of the 20th century. Today, we find a new hostility to the role of religious institutions in American life at a time when government is expanding its reach in extraordinary ways. And it is not only because of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service's contraception mandate. This may have gotten the most attention, but it wasn't the first.

Arguing before the U.S. Supreme Court in Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church and School v. EEOC last year, the Obama administration sought unprecedented limits on the autonomy of churches and religious institutions. The administration argued that if any "ministerial exception" in employment exists, it should be strictly "limited to those employees who perform exclusively religious functions." That caused Chief Justice John Roberts to ask during oral argument whether even the pope could meet the administration's definition of a religious minister. The Supreme Court unanimously disagreed with the administration, saying, "We are unsure whether any such employees exist," because even the highest ranking churchmen have "a mix of duties." Similarly, the HHS mandate allows only the narrowest exemption for religious institutions. The exemption exists only for institutions that, among other things, hire and serve only members of their own faith. As Cardinal Daniel DiNardo put it, "Jesus himself, or the Good Samaritan ... would not qualify as 'religious enough' for the exemption, since they insisted on helping people who did not share their view of God." Christians are called to reach beyond their own denominations in teaching "all nations," considering everyone their "neighbor" and doing "good to those who hate" them.

A government willing to affect the faith and mission of the Church is a government willing to change the identity of the Church. And what can we expect in the future? The National Right to Life Committee makes a compelling case that the Obama administration's "accommodation" for the HHS mandate — if accepted — paves the way for mandated coverage of "abortion on demand." And so, we see a new government intolerance of religion. Perhaps this is why Cardinal Francis George has referred to the Obama administration as "the most secularist administration I think we have ever had in this country."

During his visit to Washington in April 2008, Pope Benedict XVI noted, "Christians are easily tempted to conform themselves to the spirit of this age" (cf. Rom 12:3). The spirit of our age is profoundly secular. And secularism accepts religion – if it accepts it at all — only on its own terms. Under this view, religion is subordinated to the political interests of the secular state. And it is precisely this subordination of religion to the

state that the First Amendment seeks to prevent. Let us be clear: we value religious liberty not only because it protects our personal autonomy; we value religious liberty because of the good that religion brings into the life of the individual believer and into the life of our nation.

#### A Time for Witness, A Time for Choosing

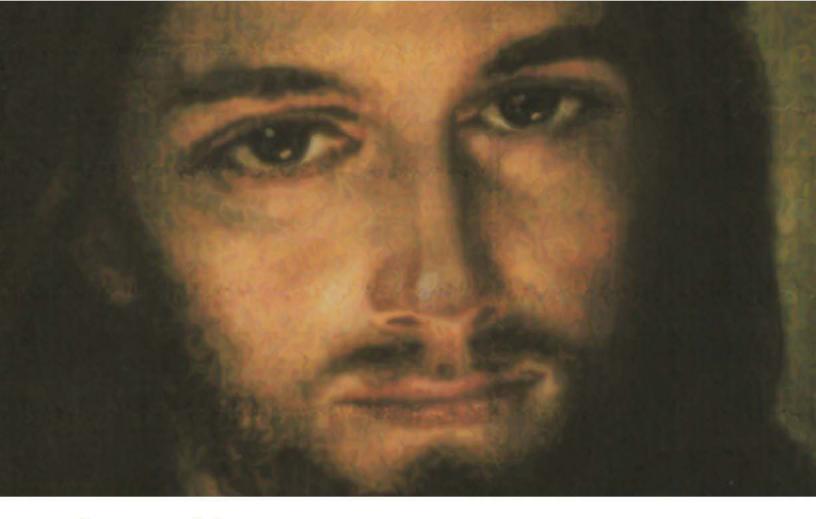
Before he was elected pope, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote that "neither embrace nor ghetto" can solve for the Church the problem of secular society (Principles of Catholic Theology, 391). Instead, Cardinal Ratzinger counseled that we must constructively engage secularism. The question for us is: How do we as Catholics go about doing this in the United States today?

Last year, HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius told a NARAL luncheon, "We are in a war." I sincerely hope we can put away such partisan rhetoric. We do not need a government that sees itself at "war" with its own citizens. We should counsel a different approach. As Christians, we are called to be witnesses. But to be true witnesses, we must preserve our Catholic identity. And like St. Thomas More, awaiting execution in the Tower of London, we must preserve it especially from the heavy hand of government. We are also called to sustain our witness through prayer. How appropriate, then, that our bishops have called upon us to take up a great fortnight of prayer for religious freedom from the vigil of the feasts of St. John Fisher and St. Thomas More to July 4.

During the current HHS controversy, some have asked, "What kind of Christians would impose such a government mandate on our religious institutions?" In December 1941, with Britain in mortal peril and America reeling after Pearl Harbor, Winston Churchill addressed the United States Congress. In that worst of times, he scorned the enemies of freedom and defiantly asked, "What kind of people do they think we are?" Today, with the same defiance, we can declare, "What kind of Catholics do they think we are?"

Do they really expect us to go gently into the dark night they are preparing for religious liberty in America? Do they not know that people who believe in "one holy catholic and apostolic church" can never agree to compromise our Church by entangling it in intrinsically evil acts? Do they not see that faithful Catholics will never accept cynical political strategies of "divide and conquer" to separate us from our bishops? When we seek by such means to preserve our own identity as Catholics, we are not a divisive force in society. To the contrary, actions that respect our religious diversity benefit all Americans.

We again recall Blessed John Paul II's words at the beginning of his great pontificate: "Do not be afraid. Open wide the doors for Christ." Every great religious renewal in America has led to an advance in civil rights – from the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights to the end of slavery and the pursuit of racial equality. But all of this has been achieved in the face of established power structures strongly and often violently opposed to these rights. So this is a time for choosing – choosing whether as Catholics we will stand together to keep open the doors of religious liberty. If we do so, then...that will bring us closer to building that culture of life and that civilization of love about which John Paul II so often spoke. May we, like Blessed John Paul II, be not afraid in our choosing.



# Finding THE GREATEST PREEDOM OF ALL

Mother Agnes delivered the following remarks April 19 at the 8th annual National Catholic Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C.

We face a summons to action in response to a global and national reality which we are reluctant to perceive: Christians as the object of open intolerance and persecution. It is a persecution reaching close to home for us all.

The following was an opening paragraph in a legal brief submitted on behalf of our friends, a religious community of Sisters south of the Mason-Dixon Line, challenging the constitutionality of the HHS [Health and Human Services] mandate:

"In their 151-year history, this congregation has, with the help of God, survived a Civil War on their doorstep, deadly epidemics, devastating floods, economic depression and tumultuous social upheaval. Today, however, they face a new, more insidious threat – their own government. Should HHS persist in implementing the [interim rule and its contraceptive] mandate without major modifications, the congregation will be forced to curtail its mission. What war and disease could not do to the congregation, the government of the United States will do. It will shut them down."

A crisis such as the one which the Catholic Church, Christians and the faithful people of God of every religion face at this moment in our nation can be a time for unprecedented growth and new life if we respond with grace. In spite of the pain, confusion and difficulties, this moment, which is our moment, contains within it tremendous spiritual potential. This crisis is a summons.

By its nature, a crisis has the power to focus our energies, clarify our vision and to put life in perspective. Our memories are charged, and, suddenly, we remember the answer to the question: "Who am I?" When Christ's life was born within us at baptism and reborn in us through an adult conversion to the living God in the person of Jesus Christ and in his Church, we were given and given again the fullness of our great dignity as a human person. With dawning awareness, we recognize ourselves as spiritual and bodily beings made in God's image to grow by grace in God's likeness, alive to the transcendent, capable of knowing and loving things "visible and invisible." Each one of us was literally willed and loved into existence by God and are sustained by the same love, that we might exercise the sublime human privilege of participating in the perfect, lifegiving love of the Trinity. Who we are is not limited to the here

and now. Yet every human person is given the capacity for moral greatness in this world, the ability to live now with a supra-human power and grace for love. We can only stand in awe before the mystery of the human person.

As memories are stirred, other things we hold precious and sacred come into view: our faith, our freedoms and our citizenship in the great American enterprise.

Our faith. Faith in God gives meaning and purpose to life and also is the path towards our ultimate destiny. Faith makes one capable of being led by the Spirit and of becoming Christ's co-worker.

Living faith is always a call to solidarity within the human family, a call to champion the greatness in our brothers and sisters, to stand up for what is right and true and just, and to defend the weakest among us. Personal fidelity is the power which underlies and lends authenticity to public witness. Our witness, however, would be hopelessly inadequate if we ourselves had not first "(Let) our gaze be more than ever firmly set on the face of the Lord" (Pope John Paul II, Novo Millennio Ineunte, 16).

Our citizenship in the American endeavor and a summons to radical solidarity. We prize our citizenship in this great land and champion our nation's founding heritage. Yet, with faith, we see the world and its events with a new, spiritual vision and recognize that in these days we are drawn up (even against our will) in the primordial drama of the battle between good and evil. Let our wills be stirred and our hearts strengthened by the words of the great Christian I.R.R. Tolkien: "Hold your ground! ... A day may come when the courage of men fails, when we forsake our friends and break all bonds of fellowship, but it is not this day. ... This day we fight! By all that you hold dear on this good earth, I bid you, stand!"

Because we are members of a "family," and even more intimately members of the Mystical Body of Christ, we are called to

be "one." Jesus' plea to his Father on behalf of his followers ["that they may be one, just as we are one; I in them and you in me, that they may be perfected in unity ..." (John 17:22)] is the basis of the call to an open, intelligent, participatory, yet radically surrendered, solidarity within the Church. Anything less is a rending of the Body and a scandal. In the Kingdom of God and the Church of Jesus Christ, love is the measure of power.

How can we be sure that our efforts will be efficacious, that our efforts will bring life and light to the world? Simply, by founding all of the actions of one's mind, heart and will in the state of God's grace. Let everything we do, therefore, begin with God's inspiration, be carried out in his grace; and then let us be consoled by the truth of what we pray in the Church's liturgy:

"Lord, You are glorified in the assembly of your holy ones; for in crowning their merits, you are crowning your own gifts." (Roman Missal, Preface of the Saints)

**Our freedom.** We insist upon the civilly protected freedom for the practice of religion and freedom, for the free exercise of conscience, because they are inherently human freedoms. No person may become the pawn of the state, no matter how small

or diminished; no matter how inconvenient. If we lose sight of the dignity of the person, all else will unravel. Peace will not last; for the violation of conscience makes any other human violation and tyranny justifiable.

As inheritors of the Judeo-Christian faith, ours is the "freedom story:" a history of freedoms won and lost, both as a people and individually. It is the story of a people who exercised the freedom to live the great dignity of the human experience becoming who we are; and this same freedom shamelessly surrendered in weakness to the sirens that excite our passions, in fear to oppressors and in faithlessness to the idols of the age.

Freedom is given us by God that we may choose to love and follow the way of transformation in Christ, allowing ourselves to become a total self-gift to another. In the words of the Exultet, "Awake, O sleeper," for the crisis we face urgently demands that we exercise and grow in this precious freedom by loving others (in the words of Mother Teresa) "until it hurts."

As we love, we grow in our capacity for love: to love and to be loved and to live out of the truth of who we are. Regrettably, because we cannot see and measure love, we are often immune to the impact which the interior movements of one's will toward good, or, sadly, toward an embrace of evil, has upon the spiritual and moral climate in our families, neighborhoods, workplaces, congregations and our nation. Evil is a pollutant far worse than carbon leaving craters in the heart and longing emptiness in souls, not just footprints on the earth.

As we gather today, Christians throughout the world in this Easter season celebrate our

final and definitive liberation: the freedom of the sons of God! The Church's celebrations are founded on the reality that, as prophesized by Isaiah, we have been ransomed by a Savior, Jesus Christ who came to "set the captives free." We rejoice in the freedom won for us by so great and loving a God. This is a freedom whose beauty surpasses all civil freedoms: the freedom to live in Christ; the freedom to live in grace. Seize that freedom! Avail yourselves of the sacrament which frees us from the bondage of sinfulness. Secure that freedom! Receive from the treasury of grace at holy Mass, in times of personal prayer and in the praise and adoration of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. Be a witness to the greatest freedom of all: women and men fully alive in the Lord, capable of reflecting the glory of God.



The freedom to live in Christ; the freedom to live in grace... seize that freedom! Avail yourselves of the sacrament which frees us from the bondage of sinfulness. Secure that freedom! Receive from the treasury of grace at holy Mass, in times of personal prayer and in the praise and adoration of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. Be a witness to the greatest freedom of all: women and men fully alive in the Lord, capable of reflecting the glory of God.



# Faith in Action PRAYING IN SOLIDARITY

#### Fortnight for Freedom Prayer

#### JOIN THE SISTERS IN PRAYER!

The United States Bishops have proposed a "fortnight for freedom," the fourteen days from June 21— the vigil of the Feasts of St. John Fisher and St. Thomas More to July 4, Independence Day. They have called all people of good will to join together in prayer and fasting for our country.

We invite you to join us in an urgent prayer for the protection of religious liberty and for a new birth of freedom in our beloved country.

Almighty God, Father of all nations, for freedom you have set us free in Christ Jesus. We praise and bless you for the gift of religious liberty, the foundation of human rights, justice, and the common good. Grant to our leaders the wisdom to protect and promote our liberties; By your grace may we have the courage to defend them, for ourselves and for all those who live in this blessed land. We ask this through the intercession of Mary Immaculate, our patroness, and in the name of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, with whom you live and reign, one God, for ever and ever. Amen

### Clarifying what is true and unmasking what is untrue.

he U.S. Catholic Bishops recently wrote, "we wish to clarify what this debate is—and is not—about. This is not about access to contraception, which is ubiquitous and inexpensive, even when it is not provided by the Church's hand and with the Church's funds. This is not about the religious freedom of Catholics only, but also of those who recognize that their cherished beliefs may be next on the block. This is not about the Bishops' somehow "banning contraception," the U.S. Supreme Court took that issue off the table two generations ago. Indeed, this is not about the Church wanting to force anybody to do anything; it is instead about the federal government forcing the Church—consisting of its faithful and all but a few of its institutions—to act against Church teachings. This is not a matter of opposition to universal health care, which has been a concern of the Bishops' Conference since 1919, virtually at its founding. This is not a fight we want or asked for, but one forced upon us by government on its own timing. Finally, this is not a Republican or Democratic, a conservative or liberal issue; it is an American issue."

"I would ask of you two things. First, as a community of faith we must commit ourselves to prayer and fasting that wisdom and justice may prevail, and religious liberty may be restored. Without God, we can do nothing; with God, nothing is impossible. Second, I would also recommend visiting: www.usccb.org/conscience, to learn more about this severe assault on religious liberty, and how to contact Congress in support of legislation that would reverse the Obama Administration's decision."

-Timothy Cardinal Dolan

#### DID YOU KNOW? Six Things Everyone Should Know About The HHS Mandate

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops offers the following clarifications regarding the Health and Human Services regulations on mandatory coverage of abortion-inducing drugs, contraceptives and sterilization.

- The mandate does not exempt Catholic charities, schools, universities, relgious communities or hospitals.
- The mandate forces these institutions and others, against their conscience, to pay for things they consider immoral.
- 3. The mandate forces coverage of sterilization and abortioninducing drugs and devices as well as contraception.

- 4. Catholics of all political persuasions are unified in their opposition to the mandate
- Many other religious and secular people and groups have spoken out strongly against the mandate.
- The federal mandate is much stricter than existing state mandates.

Additional information on religious liberty, conscience protection and the HHS ruling regarding mandatory coverage of contraceptives, sterilization and abortion-inducing drugs is available at www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/religious-liberty/conscience-protection/index.cfm.

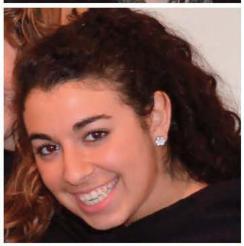
















#### SPRING-BREAKERS: What faith in Christ means to them

We hosted a group of 72 college students at Villa Maria for a 10 day Alternative Spring Break Retreat/Mission Trip. The students came from Yale, Marymount, Catholic U., North Carolina, South Dakota, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Florida. It was a mix of prayer, spiritual conferences, fun, seminars on building a culture of life, volunteer service and a Saints in the City Tour of NYC, introducing the young students to some of our old friends - Mother Seton, Mother Cabrini and Pierre Toussaint - to name a few. The best part of all was the time for students to mix and encourage one another in living the faith.

- Realizing how precious life is this week, my own life and values have been forever changed by the love of Christ. Through Mass and Holy Hour, I was able to bask in the mercy of God.
- -Molly, University of North Carolina, Asheville, Spring Break retreat week at Villa Maria Guadalupe
- The world says we were made to live for ourselves. To take and grasp and do whatever feels right at the moment. But I've been down that road...and it always only leads to greater emptiness and longing. I don't want counterfeits anymore. I know the lies. I want to radically give myself to something that is true and good and that will show me the real meaning and purpose of my life. Then I realized that it was not something I was searching for, but someone. And His name is Jesus.
- -Mike, Retreatant at Villa Maria Guadalupe
- People need to hear the truth about who God is—He is attracted to our goodness, but He is more attracted to our poverty and shortcomings. He turns those pitfalls into amazing, beautiful fountains of grace. He does not ask us to be perfect, but to have a desire to be perfected in Him it makes all the difference.
- -Paul, University of Nebraska, Spring Break with the Sisters of Life



# EXPANSION

#### Visitation Mission NYC Expansion

Heart to Heart: Mother Teresa made a deal with God, one soul out of purgatory for each photograph taken of her. Our Sisters, out for an evening walk to see the spring flowers, also experienced the way a simple photo can

change a life. Two college students stopped the group of Sisters and asked if they could take a picture with them. They had never seen or met Sisters before and had lots of questions. As we explained our mission of outreach and support for women who are pregnant they quickly fired back, "We're not pregnant!" Sr. Marita replied, "Well, you may know someone who needs help sometime" and gave them our card. After they heard more about the mission and our large network of Co-workers of Life, one of the young women said, "I know who to bring to you." She went on to explain how her sister "Jenny" is pregnant and considering abortion because she recently lost her job and her boyfriend kicked her out. They were both at the convent the next morning. As the meeting unfolded, Jenny mentioned that she has a friend who is pregnant and asked if she could bring her over.

visitation Mission in NYC has grown to the point that we have to expand to an additional location in order to keep up with the number of women contacting us. As the

calls have increased over the years, we have also increased the number of Sisters serving at the Visitation Mission from two in 2002 to eight this year. But there is literally no room at the Inn at our convent on 66th Street! In order to continue to expand the Mission, we decided to use the convent on 66th Street solely as our residence and to open a Visitation Mission Center at the parish of St. John the Martyr on 71st Street, a convenient ten minute walk uptown. The Center is complete with more office space and meeting rooms, double the number of phone lines and much more storage space for maternity clothes and baby goods.

Phone calls: Women are referred to us by healthcare workers, social workers, priests, campus ministers, pregnancy care centers, sidewalk counselors and increasingly by word of mouth. We average between 40-80 new calls each month, in

addition to keeping up with the ongoing relationships with the women we are already serving throughout the nine months of their pregnancy and afterwards for as long as they need support. We have a principle of non-abandonment, in which we are committed to walking with the women who contact us in a relationship of friendship for as long as they need us.

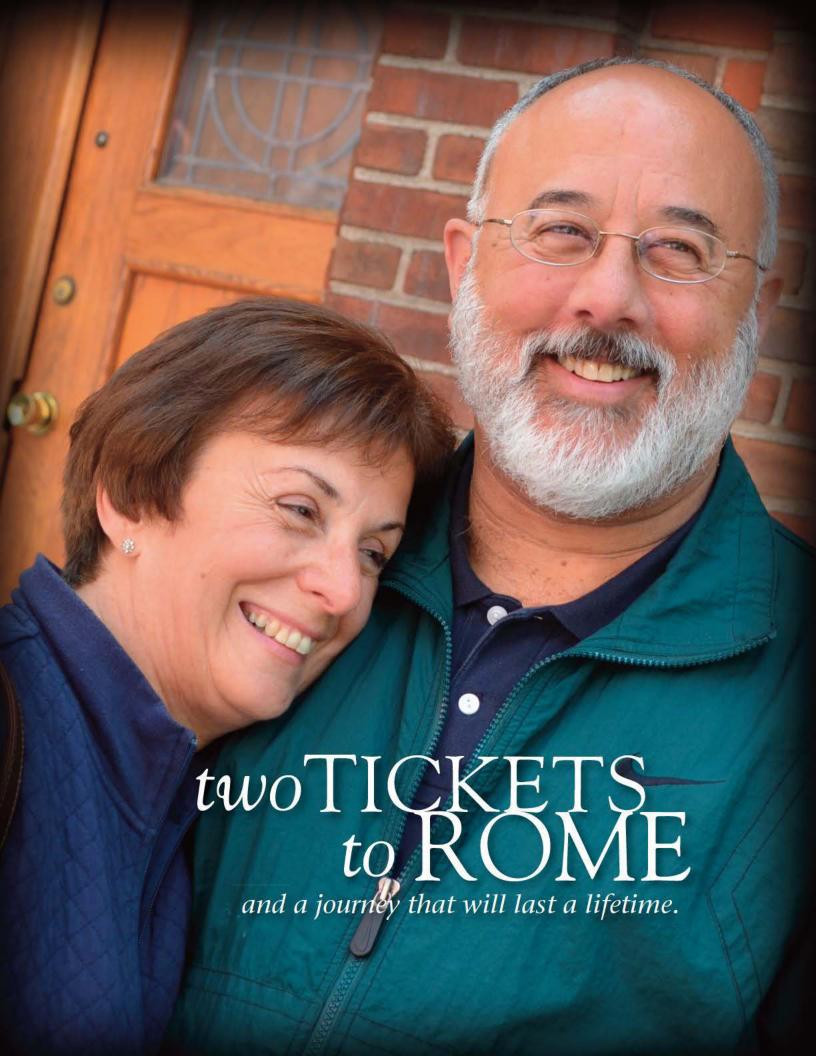
etworking Co-Workers: Typically, a Sister will have an initial long conversation with a woman who contacts us for the first time. This is the critical moment. Usually she has no one else who is willing to take the time to listen to her, to try to understand how she is feeling, what she is afraid of and worried about. We listen, try to understand, to encourage, to express our care and concern for her and to communicate that we believe in her and in her capacity to love. At times, all a woman needs is to talk, but usually she will come into the convent for a visit, sometimes even that same day. This meeting will last a couple of hours in order to explore all of the possibilities open to her: she may need medical care, counseling, legal assistance, housing, a job or tutoring to finish school. An important piece is connecting each pregnant woman with a handmaid another woman

or small group of women who reach out in friendship and ongoing support. This is where our large network of Coworkers of Life comes to the rescue! There is no way that we could respond to the growing number of women contacting us without our Co-workers commitment to help us provide for all of their needs.

We praise and thank God as this springtime of hope and new life continue to blossom and grow. We marvel at the variety of ways His Divine Providence draws women to us and at the goodness and generosity of our Co-workers who give of themselves in so many creative ways.



We have been receiving an increasing number of calls from married women, like Marisol, who have been given an adverse prenatal diagnosis. They are often pressured by the medical community to have an abortion and feel like there is nowhere to turn. We were able to connect Marisol with others who have been through a similar expereince and a group of doctors that will support her choice for life.



# An interview by Sr. Mary Elizabeth with Al Kotkin

Al and Joann Kotkin have been Co-workers of Life since 2009. We asked Al to share his marvelous conversion story that unexpectedly began on a vacation in Italy. The Holy Spirit has led both he and his wife Joann to a vibrant living of their faith. They recently decided to retire early and live simply in order to devote their time and their lives to serving the Lord.

#### Tell me about your conversion experience.

Al: I was born Jewish and Joann was raised Catholic but neither of us were practicing any faith at the time. We were on vacation in Italy in 2001 and heard that the Holy Father was going to celebrate Mass in the square in front of St. Peter's Basilica for Palm Sunday. I really admired John Paul II, so we found out where to get tickets and arrived early enough to get seats up close in front of the altar. We were just following along doing what everybody else was doing and found ourselves on our knees on the cobblestones. At that moment, something came over me. It was over whelming: a combination of a warmth, an embrace, a sense of "I am where I should be." I thought the cause was the pope, because his holiness was evident to me.

#### What did you think was happening?

Al: I didn't think, except that I knew, it was holy. I went from going along with the crowd to all of a sudden, it was for me! I felt that God was there for me, with me, amongst these 100,000 people. I didn't say anything at the time, but learned later, Joann had a similar experience. Our journey started on our knees and it was all the Holy Spirit. From that moment on the Holy Spirit has led us, putting us in situations where He wants us, and we have grown from that. I try to remain open to the Holy Spirit all the time.

#### What happened when you returned home to New Jersey?

We have not missed a Sunday Mass since that Palm Sunday in Rome. I wanted to learn more about what the change I could see in Joann was all about. I noticed that she was going to church because she was hungry for something, and church was the only thing that could satisfy it. There was clearly a change in her demeanor: a sense of peace, of comfort and satisfaction in her life. She was not just dealing with the transient stuff that life brings; there was something more now that grounded her and that was evident in who she was. I wanted to learn about her faith so I started RCIA in 2002 and during that process the faith went from a merely intellectual understanding in my head to my heart, or internalizing the faith. At the Easter Vigil in 2003, I became C atholic.

#### How is your life different now that you are Catholic?

Al: Before I was Catholic, I was the one in charge, I was the one in control, and if I wasn't, I wasn't happy. Life was just an existence. You know, it was seeking fun; I knew I had responsibili-

ties: going to work, coming home and trying to relax, getting involved with the kids in sports, getting involved in other things that in retrospect, have little or no meaning. But once Jesus came to me, there was a whole different reason to be. He is first. I try to see and serve Him in others, Now things have real meaning.

#### Can you talk at all about the Eucharist?

Al: I do remember saying to Fr. Tom, during my RCIA process, "Father, I can buy the Holy Spirt – I get that," this is before I converted, "but I don't know that I can buy Jesus in the Eucharist." And only through time and the grace of God, have I come to understand – that the Eucharist truly is the Body of Christ.

Joann and I are extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. When I bring Holy Communion to the homebound, I see on their face an incredible love and longing, knowing that they are about to receive Jesus in the Eucharist. It is so beautiful and it strengthens my faith. Jesus is so merciful and loving, and He is coming to each of these people personally. It is a powerful faith we have! And so, we try to be as reverent as we can when we are driving around Hoboken, bringing Jesus. He comes to us every day, through His real presence in the Eucharist or in someone you are talking with – He is there.

#### Tell me about the men's ministry you are part of in your parish.

Al: One other guy and I were talking with the priest who taught us RCIA and we wound up putting a men's spirituality group together that meets every Wednesday. We gather bags of food and bring them down to the train station to feed the homeless and try to have some dialogue with them. Some of these people had executive positions, families. You know, there but for the grace of God go I. We try to remind them of their dignity in conversation, not just "here's a sandwich, see you next week." So that has helped us grow as men. And then we come back and reflect on the following week's Gospel and wherever the Holy Spirit takes us. He has taken us from talking about the homeless we just fed, to the Gospel reading, to football, wives, children, work and all of it centering on bringing God into the workplace in our daily lives. It has been a wonderful experience for all of us that gives a sense of peace.

Each of us, all without trying, by our demeanor, our presence, our words, has had an influence on work settings, on the people around us. The men know who they are and what they are, and where they stand. One of the guys was a partner in a start-up computer company, and big money can be made in pornography, but they knew he would not go for it. All the guys, and they are in pretty high power jobs, have had that kind of influence. It is living the faith that tells people that you have something special inside, a gift, not of yourself, and that is the evangelization process.



Co-Workers, Al and Joann Kotkin with Sr. Rita and Sr. Giovanna

In the garment district, where I used to work, fairness is not always the leading principle. In dealing with foreign accounts, the operating principle seemed to be, who can take advantage of who first. My supervisor came to me and said "You are going over to China and this is what we need you to do..." and I said to my superior, the highest non-partner in the company, "I'm not going to do that, I cannot do that. It's against what I believe." And so, from that point on, when that kind of thing came up again, she would say, "Al, you're going over again. Uh, oh, no, we can't ask you, you're Catholic." People now recognize, there is something about the gift God's given me that prohibits me from doing things that I'm going to have to go to confession for!

#### How did you become Co-workers of Life?

Al: We were at a Mass at Old St. Patrick's and the Sisters were there. Afterwards, they spoke about their mission and we signed up right away to be Co-workers of Life. Since then we have gone to the Co-worker Training and helped out by giving rides to women, collecting and delivering baby items and praying for the women who call the Sisters.

Nichelle was one of the first women that we got to know. She had a tough go of it before the baby was born because everyone wanted her to have an abortion. She was pressured by a lot of people. We dropped off a bunch of items at her apartment the day after she gave birth. Seeing her with Jayden was a gift. We were able to hold him and look at this little guy who might not have been — it was such a tangible grace.

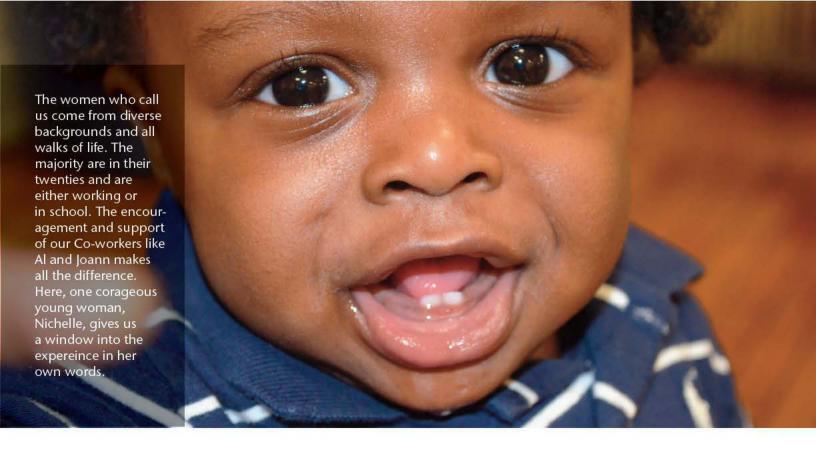
About eight months later Nichelle went to the March for Life in Washington D.C. with some of the Sisters on one of the buses going down from the Archdiocese, and I was asked to drive her home from where the bus dropped everyone off. She could not stop talking about how wonderful it was to be a mother; how she had to have the baby because it was what was right. She is not Catholic but she does recognize God's presence in her life.

All of us can serve. You have to step out of your comfort zone and find ways to do so – you get so much back from people. That's real freedom, to reach beyond your fears to help another and that empowers them with the freedom to choose what they know is right, to live their faith.

Many people think religion takes away personal freedom; that it is a set of rules of what I cannot do, rather than experiencing what you have found.

Al: If you have a spiritual life, you are on the path to true freedom. Joann and I are not tied to the world anymore. We have found something that is more valuable—we found salvation in Jesus Christ. That is the truth, which is freedom. Temporal freedoms do not hold a candle to the true freedom that faith brings.

For more information about becoming a Co-worker of Life call: 347/843-8900 or visit: sistersoflife.org/our-co-workers



## All for Jayden

#### Nichelle's Story:

Last September, when I discovered that I was pregnant, abortion was the first response that I received from people. My friend and I searched online for clinics in New York, because I was trying to convince myself that my life could go back to normal, kind of like nothing ever happened. I called and was scheduled to have an abortion the following day, without my mother knowing. My friend and I skipped school and traveled to New York. We ended up at an abortion alternative pregnancy center, and it was there that I witnessed video clips of the abortion process. It made me cry, and I knew there here was no way I could go through with it after seeing what really happens.

After talking to the counselor, I could see that there were other choices. I was introduced to the Sisters of Life that day, and met with them face to face a couple of days later. After meeting with them, I was convinced that they would not leave me, and that they would be by my side every step of the way. I was relieved to find this support because I knew deep down, even from the very beginning, that abortion was not the answer.

I faced a challenging road ahead because I had yet to tell my mother about my pregnancy, and my best friend was against my decision. When I told my mom, she cried, and I felt guilt and disappointment. That was one of my biggest fears. I did not want her to feel like she was a bad mother and that I failed her as a daughter. My mother told me that I needed to get an abortion. After this incident, the Sisters decided that we needed to get my mother to visit them as soon as possible and arranged for one of the Co-workers to bring us to the convent. At this meeting my mother could

see that others were there to help and support us. I pleaded with my mother, telling her "I'm sorry, Mom. I will not drop out of school or anything. I will still chase my dreams. You are a great mother, and you didn't fail me. I cannot abort my child. Please understand this." After this meeting, my mother was then at my side and told me, "Nichelle, you are always going to be my daughter,

going to be my daughter, and I will always be at your side."



Nichelle and Sr. Marita

I needed the people around me to support my decision. It was not going to be easy, but if you're determined and dedicated, you can do it. And I did do it. My son, Jayden Jeremiah was born on April 3rd, 2011. It was the best decision that I have ever made, and I was so blessed to have the right people by my side to help me. I was able to keep up with my school work from home after the birth of Jayden and excelled, keeping up straight A's in all Honors classes.

Now I rush home with joy to take care of Jayden, who is the reason why I work so hard. He is my motivation. It is not about me anymore. If I had to do it all over again, I would not change one thing because miracles do come in small blessings. My mother and I are closer than ever, and she has been inspired by the life of her grandson. I cannot even fathom to have chosen abortion, and to have been tricked into that idea that my life would be the same. Jayden is my life, and things would never be the same without him.

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St. Frances de Chantal Convent (Postulant house, Vocations) 198 Hollywood Avenue Bronx, NY 10465 718/863-2264 Fax: 718/792-9645

Villa Maria Guadalupe (Retreat House) 159 Sky Meadow Drive Stamford, CT 06903 203/329-1492 Fax: 203/329-1495

Sacred Heart of Jesus Convent (Holy Respite) 450 West 51st Street New York, NY 10019 212/397-1396 Fax: 212/397-1397

New York Visitation Mission to Pregnant Women 320 East 66th Street New York, NY 10021 Pregnancy help call: 212/737-0221 toll free: 877/777-1277 Co-workers of Life call: 347/843-8900

Toronto Visitation Mission to Pregnant Women St. Catherine of Siena 1099 Danforth Avenue, Toronto, ON M4J 1M5 Pregnancy help call: (416) 463-2722 Fax: (416) 463-1687

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Website: www.sistersoflife.org