

Throughout our history, people of faith have often been our Nation's voice of conscience. The foes of slavery could appeal to the standard that all are created equal in the sight of our Lord. The civil rights movement had the same conviction on its side, that men and women bearing God's image should not be exploited and set aside and treated as insignificant. The same impulse, over the years, has reformed prisons and mental institutions, hospitals, hospices, and homeless shelters.

The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., said this: "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state but rather the conscience of the state." As in his case, that sometimes means defying the times, challenging old ways and old assumptions. This influence has made our Nation more just and generous and decent. And our Nation has need of that today.

Faith remains important to the compassion of our Nation. Millions of Americans serve their neighbor because they love their God. Their lives are characterized by kindness and patience and service to others. They do for others what no government really can ever do—no government program can really ever do: They provide love for another human being; they provide hope even when hope comes hard.

In my second week in office, we have set out to promote the work of community and faith-based charities. We want to encourage the inspired, to help the helper. Government cannot be replaced by charities, but it can welcome them as partners instead of resenting them as rivals.

My administration will put the Federal Government squarely on the side of America's armies of compassion. Our plan will not favor religious institutions over nonreligious institutions. As President, I'm interested in what is constitutional, and I'm interested in what works. The days of discriminating against religious institutions simply because they are religious must come to an end.

Faith is also important to the civility of our country. It teaches us not merely to tolerate one another but to respect one another, to show a regard for different views, and the courtesy to listen. This is essential to democracy. It is also the proper way to treat human beings created in the divine image.

We will have our disagreements. Civility does not require us to abandon deeply held beliefs. Civility does not demand casual creeds and colorless convictions. Americans have always believed that civility and firm resolve could live easily with one another. But civility does mean that our public debate ought to be free from bitterness and anger and rancor and ill will. We have an obligation to make our case, not to demonize our opponents. As the Book of James reminds us, fresh water and salt water cannot flow from the same spring.

I am under no illusion that civility will triumph in this city all at once. [*Laughter*] Old habits die hard, and sometimes they never die at all. I can only pledge to you this, that I will do my very best to promote civility and ask for the same in return.

These are some of the crucial contributions of faith to our Nation: justice and compassion and a civil and generous society. I thank you all here for displaying these values and defending them here in America and across the world. You strengthen the ties of friendship and the ties of nations, and I deeply appreciate your work.

I believe in the power of prayer. It's been said, "I would rather stand against the cannons of the wicked than against the prayers of the righteous." The prayers of a friend are one of life's most gracious gifts. My family and I are blessed by the prayers of countless Americans. Over the last several months, Laura and I have been touched by the number of people who come up and say, "We pray for you"—such comforting words. I hope Americans will continue to pray that everyone in my