

Governor Kathleen Sebelius' Address to the Kansans for Faithful Citizenship Conference September 23, 2006

**** Remarks as prepared for delivery ****

Thank you for the invitation to visit with you and for the generous reception. I'd also like to thank all those individuals who were involved in organizing this important dialogue. The theme of this gathering is timely and it's an honor to be here.

We're here today to talk about leadership and the common good and I'd like to share with you my vision for the kind of moral leadership we need if we are going to continue to move Kansas forward.

Here in Kansas, our future is inexorably linked to and guided by our past. The moral compass of our state was set by the first pioneers to settle here. And they really were pioneers in more than one way.

They were the first people of European descent to come to this area, but more importantly they were pioneers in equality, determined to found a state west of the Mississippi free from the stain of slavery.

They were driven to travel west in order to create a state where all could live free and where all would be judged equally.

It took a Civil War to guarantee freedom in the law and another century to realize it in practice, but today as we strive to fulfill their dream we are reminded of those roots that make Kansas such a special place.

In addition to knowing our nation could never be great until all were free, these settlers knew survival depended on people coming together to meet the challenges and hardships of frontier life, relying on the public good.

A family could not make the long journey alone, nor could one man raise a barn, so our forbearers came together. They brought in crops for neighbors in times of illness and taught each others' children so they would have new opportunities.

They knew our communities are strongest when we are united and that when we're willing to put aside our differences we're able to accomplish great things. They realized, as we do, that we really are all in this together.

That's a message that comes to us from our heritage as Kansans, and it is also one that is a fundamental message in religious teachings.

Now, public officials who talk about their faith in public walk a delicate line.

On one hand, faith is intensely personal. Faith probes the deepest reaches of our souls and every aspect of our inner selves. It sustains us in our family lives and gives us strength to do the right thing, even when it is hard or unpopular.

I grew up with the faith tradition that people had a private, personal relationship with God. Mass was celebrated in a foreign language and the priest had his back to the congregation. Pope John XXIII changed all that, and changed the interactions of Catholics with our church, but the private-public tension of the discussion of faith still exists with many of us who went through that transition.

What is increasingly clear to me, and others, is that it is important to have a public discussion of faith, and the role faith plays in our lives. Faith calls us to community and to a vision of our shared life on earth. It calls us to think and care about something greater than ourselves and to have concern for the least and the last among us. It is through our faith that we pass our values, learned from our parents on to our children.

For too long, some have used religion to intimidate and divide us from one another. This approach does not bear fruit. People of faith are not concerned about “left” verses “right;” people of faith are concerned about “right” verses “wrong.”

To that end, actions speak louder than words. Ignoring our schools, voting against health care and generally putting the interests of the few above the interests of us all is not morally virtuous.

Today, I’m going to talk about faith in a different way. I believe in a moral vision that unites Kansans, and brings us together to work out our differences in meeting the needs of our citizens. This vision is at the heart of the common good.

Moral leadership involves choices about distributing our resources and supporting for our institutions that benefit all: our public school system, access to affordable health care, careful stewardship of our natural resources and a government that is responsive to the needs of our people.

This moral vision of our shared commitment to one another is a vision that the people of Kansas support and one that I have tried to pursue as a public servant.

Working for the common good is a not a new concept, but a core tenant of the teachings of my faith.

In the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ latest voter guide entitled *Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility*, the bishops state:

“Politics in this election year and beyond should be about an old idea with new power - the common good. The central question should not be, ‘Are you better off today than you were four years ago?’ The central question should be, ‘How can we - all of us, especially the weak and vulnerable - be better off in the years ahead?’”

This is the question that I'd like to discuss with you today.

The common good is that cherished and sacred idea central to all faiths and embodied for Christians in the Golden Rule. This ideal maintains that individuals and communities are at their greatest when they reach beyond themselves, recognizing the personal responsibility inherent in the belief that we should treat others as we wish to be treated; that we should love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

The common good is more than concern for the least among us, but a concern for all through recognition of our mutual benefit. This belief holds that all people have inherent dignity and equality. It recognizes that each of us is made "in the likeness of God" and that we reach our full potential through community and interdependence with each other. That we are all called to sacrifice and to service, and only by serving one another do we truly serve the Lord. This principle is fundamental to my understanding of my faith and it's been one of the guiding principles of my life.

My personal moral compass and introduction to the common good was set by my parents and my family. Not only did they talk about right and wrong, about sacrifice and service, but they lived their lives each and every day by those rules. My parents were active in our community: as teachers, civic volunteers, parishioners and public servants.

One of my earliest memories of my father's civic involvement was in the 1950s, when he worked with an ecumenical organization on civil rights issues in Cincinnati. Often he was challenging the status quo, and making life uncomfortable for the establishment, but it was the right thing to do.

My parents also believed strongly that responsibility came with the gifts of health, intelligence and comfort that God had given us – that "to whom much is given, much is expected."

The fundamental barometer of the common good was reinforced by the nuns who were my teachers from preschool through college. They helped shape me academically and spiritually.

In addition to showing me that women can be strong leaders, the School Sisters of Notre Dame took a childhood faith and transformed it into an active faith devoted to serving others.

They taught me we are each at our greatest when we reach beyond ourselves to love our neighbors. They taught me the importance of the two great commandments: to love the Lord, God with all your heart, mind, and soul, and to treat our neighbors as we wish to be treated.

We were often reminded, in school and in Church, of the lessons of Matthew 25, which described judgment day, and the test for getting into heaven involving feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, caring for the sick and visiting the imprisoned. The nuns and my parents showed me the beauty of the Good Samaritan, and through their deeds, they embodied the belief that faith had little meaning without action.

Those are the moral lessons I learned as a child, and that guide me each and every day.

As a wife and mother, a community volunteer, state representative, insurance commissioner and now Governor, the lessons from my family and from my faith have guided my personal and professional priorities.

Acting on behalf of the common good, expanding opportunities for all Kansans, and pursuing policies that encourage the development of the full potential of every human being are my basic principles.

Making decisions about resources, for the good of all, is a challenge in my current role. I am proud that over two-thirds of our assets are focused on educating our children, helping those in our society who are most vulnerable, and providing essential health care services for Kansans.

There is no question that the common good is advanced by advancing opportunities for all of our children, not just those who have the good fortune of having loving and supportive parents. These children need the opportunity to grow up healthy and well-educated so they are able to achieve their full human potential, and that's why my top priority as a public servant has been to advance the interests of our children.

By uniting people around the common goal of improving the welfare of Kansas kids, I'm proud to say our state has made a historic commitment to our schools. It is a commitment which will benefit all children in Kansas, giving them education needed to make the most of their own lives and to, in turn, give back to our communities.

Additionally, a moral society must ensure every child born into our community has an opportunity to reach his or her full potential. That's why I've sought to increase the number of children who have access to affordable health care, first among them the very youngest children. We need their parents to get the health care they need, as well as making sure that seniors and our most vulnerable Kansans are not left on their own.

Of course, no discussion of life and dignity of the human person can be complete without discussing the important issue of abortion.

My Catholic faith teaches me that all life is sacred, and personally I believe abortion is wrong. However, I disagree with the suggestion that criminalizing women and their doctors is an effective means of achieving the goal of reducing the number of abortions in our nation.

There is another way. By working in support of the common good we can better protect human life and the dignity of all people.

If we work hard and match our rhetoric with our actions, we can create a culture that is more welcoming of mothers and treasuring of our children. We must redouble our efforts on prevention and personal responsibility. We must stand with women who feel so alone that abortion seems like their only choice. These women need people to walk *with* them, not cast stones *at* them.

A recent study found the abortion rate in Kansas declines as employment opportunities, access to health care and support networks for women and children increase. By supporting our children with quality schools, increasing access to affordable health care for expectant mothers and their babies, creating jobs that pay fair wages and creating additional incentives for adoption, we are moving in the right direction.

I'm proud that the abortion rate has declined 11% in Kansas during the last three and half years. Of course, more needs to be done.

If we truly wish to reduce the number of abortions further, we need to work together to truly promote a culture of life, by helping women and families get the support they need when facing unexpected pregnancies and to continue to reduce the number of abortions. Health care, child care, job opportunities, affordable housing – they are all the building blocks of a culture of life and we can use them to build a future where abortion is extremely rare.

Concern for the future of our state and nation should drive every public servant. Critical to that is stewardship of our shared resources, both public and natural.

Government belongs to the people and we have a moral obligation to be honest, fair, and responsive. I have worked hard to maintain the integrity of public office while guaranteeing that state government is effective and efficient with our limited resources, eliminating wasteful spending and increasing accountability.

Additionally, stewardship requires a commitment to our shared natural resources. We are called upon to take care of the natural wonders that God has created, that means protecting our water, land and air. It means giving our children the opportunity to walk through the undisturbed Tallgrass Prairie, and it means sacrificing some luxury and comfort to protect our globe.

Put simply, moral stewardship calls on us to leave our children and grandchildren with a livable world, as rich with God's bounty as when we found it.

Each of these concerns: support for children, a respect for life and stewardship of our shared resources, are important moral priorities for our state and for each of us. They are the guideposts I have used to make decisions and to focus resources and attention.

And I believe it is on each of these that we'll ultimately be judged, first by our fellow citizens and later by God.

Did we feed the hungry? Clothe the naked? Care for the sick?

Did we act out of *selflessness*, not *selfishness*?

Did we truly love our neighbors as people of every faith are called upon to do?

These are the questions I strive every day to answer in a way that upholds what I learned from my family and my faith, and builds a society which respects and reflects our common hopes, dreams and aspirations.

Leadership for the common good embodies a moral vision that honors the dignity and potential of all members of society. And it's this sort of leadership we must seek out when we choose our leaders.

And so we must again ask, as the bishops have, "How can we - all of us, especially the weak and vulnerable - be better off in the years ahead?"

I believe we are better off today, but I also believe we still have work to do to ensure all our citizens will be better off in the years ahead.

It is that belief in the power of action for the common good that I will carry forward, and I know you will as well.

Thank you for your commitment to building on the values that have made our state great, for your dedication to improving Kansas for all of us, and for your determination to ensure our political leaders advance the common good not just in their words, but in their actions as well.