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Welcoming Remarks

The Most Rev. Philip M. Hannan, Archbishop of New Orleans

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DIOCESAN ATTORNEYS' PAPERS

WELCOMING REMARKS

THE MOST REV. PHILIP M. HANNAN

You could not have chosen a better state in which to hold this kind of meeting because down here we have never had that rigidity of division between church and state as elsewhere in the country. And we have a document to prove it.

One of the oldest Catholic schools in the country, and the oldest in the entire Louisiana Territory, is the Ursuline School once located in the old Ursuline Convent on Chartres Street. It is located on the street that runs in front of our St. Louis Cathedral and if you go about four blocks past the church you will come to the old Convent, a very impressive building constructed by the French army engineers in 1745. It is still as stout today as it was when constructed.

Soon after the United States bought Louisiana from the French, in the greatest bargain the world has ever known, the sisters became alarmed as to their status under the new government. Until the Louisiana Purchase, the government of France was legally responsible for the Church in the Louisiana Territory. So the sisters wrote to the President, Thomas Jefferson, to ask what the position of the convent and school would be. In his own hand, Jefferson penned a letter (dated 1804) stating "you can always be assured that this government will support the activities of your convent." Now this is certainly not consonant with what we have always been told was the only attitude of Thomas Jefferson toward church and state. He has always been called the originator of the doctrine of "the wall of separation between church and state." So, there is some misrepresentation in that tradition. I do not say that Thomas Jefferson's full statement of his position is contained in that one letter. I am arguing that he said something in that letter which is completely contrary to what has been the legal interpretation of his stand throughout these many

years.

Fortunately, the spirit of cooperation described in the letter of President Jefferson has always existed here. Under the administration of Governor Huey Long, the state took care of the poor. And it also took care of giving textbooks, bus transportation and other things to the children attending Catholic schools. This has been going on since 1933 and has become a pattern for the rest of the country.

As I see it, all of this works both ways. The Church has had very great input and has always exhibited great support for the worthwhile efforts of government. The church and the state here have always been united in support of the welfare of the person, the individual. You cannot separate the individual from himself and therefore there must be some cooperation between the church and the state. Under the new city administration of Mayor Ernest Morial, we were asked for the services of one of our priests to become assistant to the mayor for urban planning. This clergyman, who serves as Director of our Archdiocesan Social Apostolate, was recognized as the most experienced person in town to do the job. The mayor asked me for his services for one year and today I must answer the mayor's request for an extension of that one year service.

Unhappily, today as never before, we are seeing our national government take legal stands contrary to the principles and doctrines of the Church. We have had at various times groups within our society who were very antireligious or very anti-Catholic. But that is an entirely different thing from the situation we face today. Our national government has taken a very strong stand against what we know are primary principles and without the recognition of which we simply cannot have full human dignity. I am speaking, of course, primarily of abortion, but there are a number of other things such as the case of the National Labor Relations Board and the attempted intrusion of government into the business of the Church.

I say to you that now is the time for them to learn from us. We have a much longer history of jurisprudence in the Church than any government now existing. It was the Church that developed the laws of equity, the Chancery Laws. We are the ones who should be imparting to the government its concept of the rights of people and the procedure in protecting those rights. Above all, the state must recognize finally that we are the strongest and only institution left in the country that has consistently taken stands in defense of human dignity and human rights. It is time for us to teach the government what human rights really are.