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## *I am Thankful – For Institutions!*

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*  
by Dean Sam Candler**

Yeah, I know. Institutions get a bad rap these days, maybe ever since the 1960s. And, in this season of thanksgiving, it's easy to forget them. It's good, and easier, to give thanks for more simple organisms, like friends and family and even blessings. I certainly like giving thanks for those things!

But, I was reading a concise little book the other day by Timothy Snyder, warning us about tyranny. In that book, *On Tyranny*, he offers twenty directives for how to avoid tyranny. One of them goes like this:

***Defend Institutions.*** *It is institutions that help us to preserve decency. They need our help as well. Do not speak of “our institutions” unless you make them yours by acting on their behalf. Institutions do not protect themselves. They fall one after the other unless each is defended from the beginning. So choose an institution you care about—a court, a newspaper, a law, a labor union—and take its side.* (Snyder, Timothy. *On Tyranny* (p. 22). Crown/Archetype.)

I like his advice. Continuing the thanksgiving theme I began last week, I give thanks also for institutions. Yes, institutions like those Snyder mentions, but also churches, and governments, and schools, and even companies. And certainly things like families, too, and marriage and tradition. They are noble institutions.

Institutions are those cultural assemblies which give us tradition, guidance, and wisdom. Often, they have been around a long time. Sometimes, institutions need to be changed. Sometimes, people want to change them drastically, even violently, so great is the cultural change needed. The institution of slavery, for instance, did indeed need to be changed. The institution of colonialism needed to be changed, and our American revolution stands as one of the great cultural achievements of our country.

But, more often, institutions are also those cultural creations which keep us wise and strong. The institution of marriage, for instance, offers couples a way to formalize commitment and hope. We are better when relationships are formalized and ritualized in marriage, and touched by holiness as well.

Our governments are institutions, too. I imagine that each of us has some area of government that we would like changed, or perhaps a political leader we would prefer elected over someone else. But that is how the institution works. The system works because we have usually raised up political leaders of good faith and integrity. I am thankful for the institutions of good and decent government.

Institutions are schools, too – from preschools to universities. They contain established and proven ways of learning and developing. They raise up educators, teachers and administrators, who see the big picture, who make wise decisions that ultimately affect individuals. I am thankful for school institutions, where many of us have spent significant energy and time.

Finally, of course, institutions are churches. Yes, the same complaint applies to churches as is often directed at governments: “Let’s throw the whole system out and start from scratch!” In fact, this sentiment often affects churches and spiritual life. Naïve devotees often believe they could create a better spiritual institution if only they were in charge! But

they usually end up fabricating a pretty weak and naïve spiritual group, one which quickly repeats whatever error the originators thought they were correcting, and propagates new errors as well!

Instead, I am thankful for communities of faith that have been around for more than one generation – that have been around for many, many generations! An established church is an institution that has weathered storms, and ups and downs, and both faith and unfaith. Of course, my usual description of church is not “institution,” but “corporation.” The word, “corporation” comes from the Latin word, “corpus,” which means “body.” The church, as the “Body” of Christ, is really a living organism! Still, I am thankful for church, as institution, too.

I agree with Snyder, too, that institutions—good ones, at least—need defending. And many of the institutions that comprise the rich fabric of our country’s life really do need defending – from governments and schools, to churches and families. I give thanks for them this Thanksgiving!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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