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Addresses

Divided Hearts: American, Religion and National Policy

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Remarks by Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap Religious Institutions Law Day October 7, 2004

I'm grateful to Martin Nussbaum for inviting me to join you this morning. Rothgerber, Johnson and Lyons has represented the Archdiocese of Denver in a distinguished way on many issues, over many years. Chuck Goldberg, Glenn Burbridge, Susan Sperber and other members of the firm do an outstanding job of serving the Catholic people of Colorado. I want to thank them personally and publicly for their dedication.

I also believe that a gathering like Religious Institutions Law Day serves the common good of the whole community, and I'm glad to be part of it. Obviously I'm a Catholic bishop, speaking from a Catholic perspective, in a year when national politics and Catholic faith have overlapped in some challenging ways. But I hope at least some of my remarks today will ring true with other religious communities, and what I don't cover in my comments, I'll be glad to address through your questions.

One of the books that shaped my thinking as a teenager was George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Most of you know that it's a political fable.

Orwell imagined an English farm where the animals revolt and throw out their human master. But instead of creating a utopia, they get a regime run by pigs. The pigs behave even worse than the humans. And whenever anyone tries to question the rules, the pigs bring in a chorus of sheep, who bleat "Four legs good, two legs bad; four legs good, two legs bad," again and again, until everyone gets confused and goes home.

I've been thinking about those sheep all year long. I remember them every time someone tells me that Catholics shouldn't try to impose our beliefs on society. I remember them every time somebody warns me that religious believers need to respect the separation of Church and state.

I think these two concerns – "don't impose your beliefs on society" and "the separation of Church and state" -- aren't the real concerns at all. They're slogans. They're sound bites designed to shut down serious thought. No one in mainstream American politics wants a theocracy. No one in mainstream American politics wants to turn meatless Fridays into federal law. So we need to understand these concerns for what they are: usually foolish, frequently dishonest and ultimately dangerous arguments that confuse our national memory and our national identity.

Consider a few facts. Ninety-six percent of Americans believe in God; 90 percent pray; 93 percent of American homes have a Bible; roughly 80 percent of Americans describe themselves as Christian; and more than 40 percent of Americans attend church weekly -- which, at least on the surface, makes the United States one of the most religiously devout countries in the world.

Somewhere between 50 million and 80 million American Christians claim they've been "born again." Americans spend \$4 billion dollars a year on CDs, books and bumper stickers honoring Jesus Christ. The *Passion of the Christ* made more than \$600 million in the first six months of its release, most of it in the United States. Americans in 2004 – and not only Christian Americans -- remain a deeply religious people, not just in words, but also in practice. That doesn't stop us from also being sinners and hypocrites. But it does mean that most of us draw the moral roadmap for our lives from our religious faith.

Now, without simplifying things too much, law always involves turning somebody's ought into everybody's must. When we say that we "ought to" do something, we're making a moral judgment. When we turn that moral judgment into legislation, we're imposing our views on society.

People shouldn't jaywalk because trucks will run them over, and that's bad. Therefore we make rules against jaywalking. People shouldn't racially discriminate, because other people will suffer, and that's bad. Therefore we make laws to ensure civil rights. The racial bigots among us may feel imposed upon, but that's the way it is in a democracy. Some interests win, and some lose. Racial bigots have the right to organize and change the law. We hope they don't succeed, but they have every right to try. Until they develop a racist consensus, though, they suffer under the weight of majority moral opinion.

Real pluralism always involves a struggle of ideas. Democracy depends on people of conviction fighting for what they believe in the public square – non-violently and ethically, but vigorously and without embarrassment. People who try to separate their private convictions from their involvement in public issues are not acting with integrity, or with loyalty to their own principles. And in doing so, they're stealing from their country.

Here's an example. People who support permissive abortion laws have no qualms at all about imposing their views on society. Back in the 1970s, they couldn't do it democratically through the ballot box, so they coerced it through the courts. And over the past 30 years, they've fought every attempt to limit or change those laws through the democratic process. That's entirely appropriate. That's their right. They're acting on their beliefs.

But in a democracy, everybody -- including religious believers -- gets to play that game. In fact, to be healthy, the political process demands it. So for Catholics to be silent in an election year about easy abortion laws and pro-abortion campaign agendas out of some misguided sense of good manners is actually a form of theft from our national conversation.

If Catholics really believe in the sanctity of human life, then there's no way we can stand by while some people choose -- or allow others to choose -- to kill their unborn children. There's no way we can disassociate ourselves from 40 million abortions since 1973. If we don't try to end abortion, not just socially but legally, we become complicit in that violence.

Now we may lose the political battle to change our abortion laws, but fighting that battle is the nature of the legal process. Fighting it is thoroughly American. For religious believers not to advance their convictions about public morality in public debate is not an example of tolerance. It's an example of cowardice.

If we believe that abortion is gravely wrong -- that it kills an unborn child and attacks the common good -- then we have a duty, not just a religious duty but also a democratic duty, to punish the candidates who want to allow it. Failing to do that is an abuse of power on our part, because that's where we exercise our power as citizens most directly -- in the voting booth.

I think we can agree that the many religious believers who worked against slavery and segregation, or in favor of farm worker rights and industrial labor justice, served their country very well. They did what they did because their view of human dignity was shaped by their religious faith.

If Martin Luther King had not worked to "impose his religious views" on society, the world would be very different and worse. So we need to see that criticism for what it really is: a modern version of "Four legs good, two legs bad." People who fear and dislike religious faith don't want it to be part of our public discourse. But if we allow that to happen, we not only delude ourselves about the nature of American politics; but we also only have ourselves to blame.

The same applies to the idea that "separation of Church and state" somehow means that religious believers should shut up about legislative issues, the appointment of judges and public policy. To Catholics with a sense of recent American history, "separation of Church and state" has a uniquely anti-Catholic ring to it. Lurking behind those words in the 1960 presidential campaign was the hint that Roman dogma might somehow trump the American Constitution if Kennedy were elected.

Kennedy handled it by simply separating his Catholic identity from his public service. This wasn't too hard because his faith seemed largely nominal. But in doing it, Kennedy confused an entire generation of Catholics and other Americans about the proper relationship of Church and civil authority.

For Catholics, the civil order has its own sphere of responsibility and its own autonomy apart from the Church. But that doesn't mean that civil authorities are exempt from moral engagement and criticism, either by individual believers or by the Church as a body. And I think this fits very comfortably with the mind of the Founders.

What the Founders intended was to prevent the establishment of an official state Church. They never intended, and never wrote into the Constitution, any prohibition against religious believers, religious leaders or religious communities taking an active part in public issues and the political process. The idea of exiling religion from public debate would have made no sense to them.

While Jefferson and Franklin were Deists, most of the Founders were practicing Christians. All of them were deeply influenced by Christian thought. Our history as a nation is steeped in religious imagery and language, so I don't want to belabor the obvious. But I do encourage all of you to read Vince Carroll's excellent book, *Christianity on Trial: Arguments Against Anti-Religious Bigotry*. Vince is the editorial pages editor of the *Rocky Mountain News*. Chapter 8 of his book does a great job tracking the Christian roots and Christian contributions to American democracy.

The idea that we can pull those religious roots out of our modern political life without hurting who we are is very dangerous. The United States is non-sectarian. That's good. But "non-sectarian" does not mean anti-religious, atheist, agnostic or even fully secular. Our public institutions flow from a religious understanding of human rights and human dignity.

When the "separation of Church and state" begins to mean separating religious faith from public life, we begin to separate government from morality and citizens from their consciences. And that leads to politics without character, which is now a national disease.

From a Catholic perspective, the better we live our faith, the better we live our citizenship. The more faithful we are as religious believers, the more faithful we are as Americans. That may not get a candidate elected, but it will keep him honest – and his honesty will make our public life more honest.

If people are serious about their faith, then their whole lives will naturally be formed and guided by their religious convictions. For Catholics, all of our actions and all of our choices should be rooted in our Catholic identity and in our relationship with God. That means our choices at work; at play; within our families; and also the choices we make in living out our citizenship.

The Apostle James wrote that, "faith without works is dead." People need to act on what they claim to believe. Otherwise they're just lying to themselves. Jesus told His disciples to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. But what belongs to Caesar is actually very limited. And our souls belong to God – not to Caesar. So for Catholics, our relationship with the surrounding political order will always hinge on questions of faith. And it's exactly that foundation of faith that gives American democracy life.

Foreigners often see this more clearly about our country than we do. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great Lutheran pastor who was later killed by the Third Reich, wrote that: "The American Revolution was almost contemporary with the French one, and politically the two were not unconnected. Yet they were profoundly different in character. [American] democracy is not founded on the emancipated man, but quite the contrary, on the kingdom of God and the limitation of all earthly power by the sovereignty of God. [In contrast to] the Declaration of the Rights of Man, American historians can say that the federal constitution was written by men who were conscious of original sin" and the weaknesses of the human heart.

Now having said all this, it's also true that vast elements of the American academic, scientific, literary, artistic and mass media establishments routinely treat religion with contempt. Some of you will remember the artist Andres Serrano's creation where he portrayed a crucifix submerged in urine. Or the New York public museum that featured an image of the Virgin Mary smeared with elephant dung.

On a visit to Blockbuster last weekend, I counted more than 20 feature films released over the last decade that directly or indirectly attack Catholic faith, practice or history. The New York Times and other major urban newspapers routinely cast evangelicals and the so-called religious right as dangerous zealots. The paranoia that preceded the release of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* was matched only by the surprise of Hollywood at how well it did. And as Vince Carroll shows in his book, public school textbooks have under-reported and distorted the role of religion as a positive force in American history for decades.

American religious tolerance owes as much to Roger Williams, who founded the Rhode Island colony, and William Penn, who founded the Pennsylvania colony, as it does to any thinker of the Enlightenment. But you won't hear that in the average high school history class. Both Williams and Penn were devoutly Christian.

This gulf between what most Americans believe about God and the anti-religious prejudice of many of our cultural leaders is a mystery. Why does it happen? One answer is that religious believers cause some of the problems ourselves. We're sinners and hypocrites. That's pretty obvious. Every case of clergy sexual or financial misconduct, and every example of bigotry by a churchgoer, confirms our weakness.

But the struggle of religious believers against our own failures isn't exactly news. It doesn't explain the scope of the hostility directed toward religion in the United States over the last 50 years.

I think the real answer lies elsewhere. We can hear it in Ted Turner's famous crack that, "Christianity is for losers." In a knowledge economy, religion looks stupid. In an aristocracy of brains, faith is for suckers. We can see traces of this attitude toward organized religion as early as Jefferson and Franklin. But as America has become a world power in science and technology, mass media, wealth and economic influence, the confidence of her knowledge classes has grown.

Power breeds faith in itself. So do talent, achievement and success. Many of America's creative and professional leaders feel they don't need and certainly don't want a competing source of authority outside of themselves – especially if it tries to tell them what they can and cannot do in the name of a God they can't see.

This is why spirituality seems so popular these days in the mass media and "religion" doesn't. Spirituality can be whatever an individual wants to make it. Religion is a different story. Religion always involves duty to a larger community and to truths bigger than oneself. That's what "religion" means. It comes from the Latin word *religare*, "to bind." The religious believer binds his or her life to a creed shared by other people, and agrees to be judged by it. Religious faith, lived consciously and seriously, is an act of humility, not self-improvement.

Writing a decade ago, the historian Christopher Lasch saw that today, "it is [America's leadership classes] – those who control the international flow of money and information, preside over philanthropic foundations and institutions of higher learning, manage the instruments of cultural production and thus set the terms of public debate – that have lost faith in the values" of the American experiment. In their self-reliance and overconfidence, our "thinking classes have seceded not just from the common world around them but from reality itself."

This has very tough results both at home and abroad. As I said earlier, most people at most times in history have drawn their moral guidelines from their religious beliefs. That makes sense, because religion is about the meaning of our lives. It's about purpose and last things and our final destination. If we begin with God's love and the goal of heaven in mind, then we order our behavior in this life accordingly. We don't steal, we don't lie, we don't commit adultery; we help the poor, we comfort the sick, we shelter the homeless.

The secular view of the world, by its nature, can't deal with questions of larger meaning. And by refusing to engage the questions that really matter in life, secularism robs us of the foundation for our dignity and our moral vocabulary. It robs our politics of the ideals that make us a nation and a people, rather than just a mob of individuals.

What results is a loss of any sense of a common future -- a loss of active hope -- and when that happens you get the kind of demographic collapse we see today in Europe. Population replacement requires 2.1 births per woman. Overall European rates are already lower than 1.6. In rejecting its Christian identity, Europe has basically erased its own memory. In a hundred years Europe will be a radically different continent -- and quite possibly Muslim, because Muslims continue to bear children, and in having children, they claim the future.

Secularism also fails in its understanding of the outside world. I have the privilege of serving on the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom. It's sobering work sometimes because so many nations around the world simply ignore the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and religious freedom often seems like a low priority even for U.S. foreign policy.

But all across the southern hemisphere, Christianity and Islam are growing very rapidly in numbers. We live in a religious age. Religion has always been, and it continues to be, the most powerful culture-forming force in history. Hostility to religion in our domestic public life makes Americans unable to think clearly overseas.

This is a fatal weakness. The idea that we can have a dialogue with the emerging world in purely secular language is ignorant and foolish. We only need to look at our problems in Iraq. The assumptions we made about creating a secular, democratic Iraq, and the realities we're now dealing with, are completely out of sync. If American policymakers refuse to understand and respect the power of religious faith in the world, we're headed for more of the same problems at enormous cost.

We can't give what we don't have. Americans are a religious people. We deny that at our peril. The more we drive religion out of our public life, the poorer we become and the less we have to offer in our engagement with the world.

We are more than simply "one nation under God." In the case of the United States -- in the light of our history and the founding ideas and documents that shaped us as a people -- we are one nation because of our belief in God.

There is no more loyal form of citizenship than to protect that religious heritage for the generations who will follow us.