



Most Rev. Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap
Archbishop of Denver

Addresses

WORLD, WORK AND FAMILY: The role of women in building a culture of life

October 19, 2003

I want to talk about women today. So naturally I'm going to start by talking about men – not because they're more important than women, but because they're not.

Back in June I had the pleasure of viewing an early version of Mel Gibson's new movie, *The Passion of Christ*. It's really a wonderful film. I hope all of you will see it and bring others to see it — although I need to warn you that it's not for young children. It's too real and too violent.

But it's also very moving. I saw it with five other men, just a small group in a small room. When the movie ended, it took at least a minute for anybody to say anything. The emotions were so strong that none of us could come up with the right words.

Now as a bishop, I talk about Jesus a lot, so I began to wonder why this one film had affected me so deeply. I began to notice that other men who saw the film had the same experience. I've known a lot of faithful Catholic men in my life. But I know a lot more who don't know how to articulate their faith, and many others who simply delegate the "religion thing" off to their wives and daughters. *The Passion of Christ* does something unusual to men. Some can't get the film out of their head for weeks after seeing it. And now I think I know why. There are two reasons.

A lot of us grow up with a mental picture of Jesus that's really very strange. It doesn't correspond to His reality at all. Some of us tend to imagine Jesus as either an unearthly miracle-maker or a vaguely effeminate holy man. We don't know how to resolve who Christ is. We *believe* that Jesus is fully God and fully man. We say that publicly at every Sunday Mass in the Creed. But we have nothing to look at to help us see what that means.

I think one reason men remember *The Passion of Christ* is because Jim Caviezel — who gives just an astonishing performance — shows us Jesus as someone who is absolutely real, both in the divinity of His person, and in the humanity of His nature, friendships and suffering. And that *manliness* of Jesus, that heroism, is something men can respect and love and want to follow.

But of course, manliness and heroism don't exist in a vacuum. They're shaped by many things, but especially by examples of courage. They're formed by a daily, intimate experience of love, with all the little moments of joy and sorrow, teasing, correction and encouragement that are part of real life. And that's the second reason men remember *The Passion of Christ*. Not every man has a wife or sisters, but almost every man has the memory of his mother's unconditional love. Every man knows in his heart that the best of what he is comes through his parents, and especially from his mother. And what Maya Morgenstern shows us so movingly as Mary in *The Passion of Christ* is how the love of a mother touched the life of Jesus Christ. Jesus shared exactly the same moments of maternal tenderness and humor that every son thrives on.

In our piety sometimes we tend to think of Mary as a "means to an end," the vehicle God used to bring His son into the world. But God chose Mary not to "use" her like an instrument, but because He loved her. He saw in her the beauty and character of a woman who would freely and lovingly shape His son into the man He needed to be. We can't understand Jesus outside the love of His mother, any more than we can understand ourselves outside the experience of our families.

When we listen to the Sermon of Jesus on the Mount — “Blessed are you who are poor; the kingdom of God is yours” (Lk 6:20) — we’re also hearing Mary: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my savior . . . [for] He has lifted up the lowly; the hungry He has filled with good things, while the rich He has sent away empty” (Lk 1:46-47, 52-53). Out of the faith and the flesh of Mary, the woman, God fashions the Redeemer of the world. Without Mary, there is no story of redemption. Without Mary, the woman of faith, there is no Jesus, the Son of God.

Over the last few months, I’ve wondered many times why a film like *The Passion of Christ* would trigger so much controversy even before it gets to the theaters. Maybe you’ve heard about it in the media. One allegation against the film is anti-Semitism, which is a very serious sin. The Jewish community has good reason to always be alert for it. As Catholics, we need to understand and respect that concern. And we need to do everything we can to resist any prejudice against the Jewish people.

But having seen the film, I don’t think anything in *The Passion of Christ* qualifies as anti-Semitism. I think that secular hostility to the film comes from something deeper and more inarticulate than any worries about religious prejudice. We might even track the source of that hostility to one particular moment in the film that every Christian already knows, whether we’ve seen the movie or not.

Near the very end of *The Passion of Christ*, soldiers take the body of Jesus down from the cross. They place Him in the arms of His mother. It’s an image we all remember from the 13th Station of the Cross, and from Michelangelo’s great sculpture, the *Pieta*. And we’re left with a picture of a man who — out of love — has accepted betrayal, beatings, humiliation and death on the cross; and a woman who — out of love — has stayed with Him as He suffered and died, and who now cradles her dead son in her arms, in the same way she held him as an infant.

I think we find the greatness of Mary right here, in this moment. She’s lost everything. She’s an image of humiliation and powerlessness. But she’s also a picture of what Job meant when he said, “Though [God] slay me, yet will I trust in Him” (Jb 13:15, KJV). Mary’s kind of faith is unreasonable. Mary’s kind of love is too deep, too strong and too unselfish — and it offends the pride of the modern world.

The reason the secular world hates films like *The Passion of Christ* is because they persuade the heart with the logic of love. The reason the secular world seeks to reinvent or reinterpret Mary is because she’s dangerous. She’s the model of mature human character — a human being who co-creates a new world not through power, but through *unselfish* love, faith in God, and the *rejection* of power.

That kind of witness goes against the spirit that dominates our world — the immaturity and selfishness in our personal consumption, our politics and our workplaces, and even within our families. André Malraux once asked a priest to name the single biggest lesson he had learned from hearing confessions. Without skipping a heartbeat the priest said, “There are no grown-up people.”

The struggle for power is what the modern world is all about. It really doesn’t take very long to go from Francis Bacon saying, “Knowledge is power;” to Napoleon Bonaparte saying, “I love power. But I love it as an artist. I love it as a musician loves his violin, to draw on its sounds and chords and harmonies;” to Josef Stalin saying, “One death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.”

Just read the newspapers. The result of our immaturity and selfishness at every level of American daily life is a competition that breeds an anger that breeds violence — the violence of open warfare; of religious terrorism; of unjust wages and unjust immigration policies; of simply putting our own comfort above the needs of others; the violence of abuse and infidelity between spouses; and even the polite violence of the language we use to smooth over the killing of new life.

On October 8, the Associated Press reported that “a new combination of blood tests and ultrasound can detect fetuses with Down syndrome sooner, and more accurately, than standard U.S. screening tests, offering women more peace of mind and more time to decide whether to end a pregnancy.” The article quoted one researcher as saying that, “The absolute biggest advantage is that this allows women to make private decisions” before they’re visibly pregnant.

Peace of mind and the power to decide are good things, but not if the price tag is a human life. Children with Down syndrome are not a mistake or a failure. Imagining them that way only reveals our own lack of humanity. A friend of mine who's the mother of a son with a disability likes to say that the only difference between German doctors in the 1930s and some of our own medical establishment today is that now we have better PR firms. The hostility to human weakness, the anger at human imperfection, is exactly the same now, as it was then.

Children with Down syndrome are children of God. They can live happy and fruitful lives. They give far more love back to their parents than they ever take. And because they belong first to God, killing them can never be a "private decision." It always has wider consequences — beginning with the grief of the mother. It's the woman who bears the spiritual cost of an abortion. Not the doctor, not the researcher, and too often, not even the father. That's the lie in sanitized language like "peace of mind" and "private decision." *The mother always bears the cost, because every mother is always a part of her child.*

I've spoken a lot, over the years, about our culture of selfishness — the unrest that forces us to keep feeding our appetites to prove that we control the world around us — but it bears repeating here, because our immaturity and self-absorption have created four big problems.

The first problem is *our inability to reason*. Reasoning takes time. It needs a vocabulary of ideas. Reasoning forces us to test and compare competing arguments. But the America we live in today is a culture built on marketing, and marketing works in just the opposite way. Marketing feeds our desires and emotions, and it suppresses critical thought, because thinking gets in the way of buying the product or the message. That's why marketing is tied so tightly to images — like fast cars on an empty road. Images work on our appetites, quickly and very effectively, at the subconscious level.

Here's a second problem: *our inability to remember*. The historian Christopher Lasch once said that Americans are a people stranded in the present moment. We like nostalgia, because it's a kind of entertainment. But we really don't like history because the past — as it really happened — burdens us with all sorts of unfinished business. It's a pain in the neck. History imposes obligations on the present, but Americans prefer to think that we invent ourselves, and that anything is possible. The result is that Americans usually have a very poor grasp of history, and we learn too little, too late, from the lessons of the past.

The third problem is *our inability to imagine and hope*. Americans like immediate results. We're practical. We're very good at making money, and we're very, very good at science and technology. But technology always comes with a price. Edward Tenner called this the "revenge of unintended consequences." And one of the unintended consequences of our science is that we're now the victims of our own power.

When Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua retired earlier this month, I had the privilege of succeeding him as interim chair of the bishops' Pro-Life Activities Committee. And one of my first jobs was reviewing a proposed letter to congressional leaders that objected to granting patents on human beings and embryos. Thirty years ago, "manufacturing" a human person was unimaginable. Now it's plausible. Now it's in the neighborhood, and what's worse, we've lost the moral vocabulary to deal with it. We've forgotten how to talk about the soul, and why the human person is more than just another animal or product.

Hope and imagination flow out of a belief in a higher purpose to our lives. If we're nothing more than very intelligent carbon atoms, then hope and imagination are just quirks of our species. They don't really mean anything. And any talk about the "sanctity of the human person" is just a lot of beautiful but empty words.

The fourth and final problem is *our inability to live real freedom*. Freedom is more than an endless supply of choices. Choice for its own sake is just another form of idolatry. Real freedom is the ability to see — and the courage to do — what's right. But when we begin to doubt that right and wrong exist, we also lose our ability to talk about things like freedom, truth and the sanctity of the human person in a common vocabulary.

What we get instead of freedom is a kind of anarchy of pressure groups and personal agendas held together by just one thing: the economy we all share . . . and that's not the basis of a community or even a good conversation. In fact our economy, more than anything else in modern life, teaches us to see *almost everything* as an object to be bought or sold. This is what Jeremy Rifkin means when he describes American culture as more and more a "paid-for experience" based on the commodification of passion, ideals, relationships and even time. If we want freedom, we *buy* it by purchasing this car or that computer. If we want romance, we *buy* it by purchasing this cruise or that hotel package.

The trouble is, the more that our advertising misuses the language of our dreams and ideals to sell consumer goods . . . the more confused our dreams and ideals become. We trick ourselves to the point where we no longer recognize what real love, honest work, freedom, truth, family, patriotism — and even life itself — look like.

This is the world American women face in 2003. And they have two ways to deal with it. The first is to compete head on with men for a piece of the power. That means beating men at their own game. And of course, the record of the last 50 years shows that women have all of the same intellectual skills as men and many of the same physical abilities. In some areas, even in the military, women clearly outperform men.

But there's a catch. There's a cost. The price tag of this kind of "equality" too often means denying the differences between women and men. It can mean being just as competitive and aggressive as men. It can mean putting career first. It can mean fearing the things that make up the feminine genius — the acts that make women, women. That's why so much of today's secular feminism hates fertility. That's why abortion and contraception are such important secular icons, even though they attack human sexuality at its roots. Fertility is seen as a weakness. Children mean taking responsibility for somebody else. Children mean — or *should* mean — that a woman will depend on the love of a husband. And that's frightening, because too many men today never learned how to be men.

This kind of false "equality" doesn't work because it tries to escape who we are. It makes us look at and interpret the world through a broken piece of glass. Germans in the 1930s looked at everything through the lens of race. Marx saw the world through the lens of class struggle. And now we have a generation of new thinkers making exactly the same mistake, not with some bad racial or economic theory as their lens, but with gender.

Not one of these tools for understanding human experience works. All of them *always* lead to somebody suffering. The reason is pretty simple. We can't explain the human person without including God in the conversation. And God has something to say to us about ourselves, both in Scripture and through His Church.

Genesis tells us that, "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Gen 1:27). That one simple truth about the equality of men and women flows through 4,000 years of faith. Sometimes we've forgotten it. Many times we haven't lived it well. But it underpins all of Catholic culture so strongly that even Christianity's greatest enemies have seen it.

In 1665, right at the peak of Muslim conquest in Europe, a Turkish writer and diplomat — Evliya Celebi — visited Vienna. In his report home he wrote:

"In this country I saw a most extraordinary spectacle. Whenever the emperor meets a woman in the street, if he is riding, he brings his horse to a standstill and lets her pass. If the emperor is on foot and meets a woman, he stands in a posture of politeness. The woman greets the emperor, who then takes his hat off his head to show respect for the woman. After the woman has passed, the emperor continues on his way. In this country and in general in the land of the [Christians], women have the main say. They are honored and respected out of love for Mother Mary."

Bernard Lewis, the great Middle East scholar, once said that the status of women is the single most profound difference between Christian and Muslim civilization. He noted that early "Muslim visitors to Europe [spoke] with astonishment, often with horror . . . of the incredible freedom [and] deference" shown to Western women.

Of course, that little history lesson doesn't do a lot for women experiencing bias or mistreatment right here, right now. But it does show us two things.

First, no movement, ideology, political party or institution *anywhere*, in *any* country, can match the Christian faith in promoting the dignity of women. And second, women should always turn to the Church as their mother and defender, because in her arms, in her strength, they can begin to re-humanize the world.

People who criticize the Church for not ordaining women to the priesthood ignore her record of promoting the dignity of women. They also misunderstand the nature of the Church herself, the sacramental nature of the priesthood and the Christian understanding of equality based on different but complementary gifts from God.

Pope Paul VI once said that, "Within Christianity, more than in any other religion and since its very beginning, women have had a special dignity." The Closing Message of the Second Vatican Council said that, "The hour is coming, in fact has already come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness; the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved."

What that influence means and how that power is used — those are the questions that every woman in this audience will help answer.

"Man and woman He created them." God made men and women equal but different for a reason — to love each other, to help and complete and depend on each other in the family and in the world. The genius of women is different from the genius of men. Every few months I visit my mother in Kansas, and each time it's a little more difficult because she's 93 now, and I know I won't have her for much longer. But even now I can still look in her eyes, and beneath all the age and the cares and the memories, I can still see the young woman my father loved, and why he loved her.

Women express their genius through mercy, patience, endurance and forgiveness — a hunger to embrace and protect what Edith Stein described as the "living, personal and whole." But they also have a realism that comes from the labor of bearing new life. I think women, better than men, know what's true and important about the world. Sigrid Undset, the great Norwegian woman writer, once said that, "Facts may be true, but they are not truths — just as wooden crates or fence posts or doors or furniture are not 'wood' in the same way a forest is, since it consists of the living and growing material from which these things are made." Men usually understand the facts of their daily life. But I think women more easily see the truth of the people and the relationships hidden behind the facts.

The genius of every woman is to *love*; to protect and nourish the lives entrusted to her; and to support the full development of life in others. It's the same whether you're a mother, or a consecrated religious, or a woman who lives the single vocation. It was true for Dorothy Day in all of her political organizing. Day once described her radicalism as "works of mercy." And in converting to the Catholic faith she said, "I loved, [and] like all women in love, I wanted to be united to my love." The genius for love is written on the heart of *every* woman, and it's the same whether you're a teacher or lawyer, a scientist or secretary.

St. Teresa of Avila, one of the great doctors of the Church and the intellectual equal of any man of her day, reminded herself and her Carmelite sisters every morning to, "Accustom yourself continually to many acts of love, for they enkindle and melt the soul." Teresa knew what was true and important. Women who love well become real women. And in becoming real women, they draw men into being true men.

When the Catholic Daughters of the Americas began 100 years ago, the world was a very different place. As I was browsing through my copy of *A Century in Review* — which is a wonderful history of the Daughters, and if you don't have a copy, I hope you can get one — I was struck by the character I found in so many of the faces of the women who have led and served the Daughters over the years.

These were strong, intelligent women. They deeply loved their faith. Each of their lives was a seed that bore fruit in service to the Church, defense of the family, religious education, help for the poor, support for the missions — in other words, in almost every form of Catholic apostolic action in the world. Their legacy now belongs to this assembly today. And believe me, the Church needs you.

Mother Church *needs* Catholic Daughters. And the world *urgently* needs the witness of Catholic women — because the next 100 years will be even more challenging, than the last.

For each of us, the future belongs to the plan of God. He made each of us different to do different parts of His work, and to be saints by different paths. Earlier today Pope John Paul II beatified another Teresa, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and I think in her understanding of love — the same unconditional love Mary had at the foot of the cross — we can end our words and begin our actions.

Blessed Teresa said, “Stay where you are. Find your own Calcutta. Find the sick, the suffering and the lonely right there where you are — in your own homes and in your own families, in your workplaces and in your schools . . . You can find Calcutta all over the world, if you have the eyes to see. Everywhere, wherever you go, you find people who are unwanted, unloved, uncared for, just rejected by society — completely forgotten, completely left alone.”

So beginning here, today, right now, may God grant us the courage to be the women and men He created us to be. May God grant us the courage to love.

Thank you for the privilege of being with you today.