



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

Addresses

A Culture of Life from a Culture of Truth

October 27, 2000
Lincoln, Nebraska

Let's begin with a quiz. Just raise your hand if you know the answer.

How many of you know where Manzikert is?

How many of you liked Monty Python?

How many of you know what Hagia Sophia is?

How many of you are wondering if you're at the wrong talk?

My job tonight is to speak about the "culture of life" in our country – why we don't have one, and how we can build, or rebuild, one. And I'm going to do that. But I want to take a roundabout route to get there, because we need to understand that America's problems go much deeper than bad laws or weak political leaders. Bad laws and weak leaders are things we should certainly worry about. And we need to do something about them on November 7. But they're a symptom, not the cause.

If we fix the cause, the symptoms fix themselves. That's why I began with those questions. They're a history quiz. History requires the ability to remember. It's our personal and communal memory of real things which happened in the past — lessons that guide us in the present, and therefore also shape the future. History is the soil in which the seed of a people's life takes root.

We've all seen films or read stories where a woman has a car wreck and wakes up with amnesia. She doesn't know who she is, or where she lives. She doesn't know her family or friends. And usually she falls into the grip of bad people who want to manipulate her confusion, until her real friends show up and her memory comes back. A person with amnesia is, for practical purposes, a "non-person." So amnesia is very dangerous. If you don't have a past, you don't have a present. And if you don't have a present, you don't have an identity — and you can't build a future that makes sense.

Here's my point: What's true for individual persons is also true for cultures. And I'll give you an example.

A couple of years ago, the BBC ran a documentary series called *The Crusades*. The series had a point of view. According to the series, the men of the Middle Ages who embarked on the Crusades were pretty much a mob of semi-barbarian thugs. These gangsters, egged on by a politically ambitious papacy and greedy princes, invaded the cultured lands of the Middle East and — in the name of religious fanaticism — committed rape, murder, robbery, genocide and cannibalism for 200 years.

Who appeared in and narrated the BBC series? Terry Jones. And what are his credentials? Well, he studied medieval literature as an undergraduate at Oxford. And he was a member of the Monty Python comedy troupe. That's about it. Now, I happen to like Monty Python. In fact, I like them a lot. Even 20 years later, their work is very funny. But I don't want Terry Jones telling me what my history is. Because that amounts to telling me who I am . . . and what my past means.

Reinventing history, literature and even the Bible is a popular hobby these days. As it turns out, Terry Jones is just two years older than me, and my generation seems to have a particular gift for saddling the past with the prejudices of the present. So I'd like to mention — for the record — some of the details Terry glossed over in his BBC series.

Let's go back to my earlier question about Manzikert. A thousand years ago, Manzikert was a little town in eastern Asia Minor. Asia Minor was part of the Byzantine Empire. The Byzantines were Christian. By 1071, they had already been fighting Muslim invasions for nearly 400 years.

Muslim jihads, or holy wars, had already overrun Egypt, North Africa, Palestine, the Middle East and Persia, all of which, excepting Persia, had been substantially Christian. In each of those places, the invaders systematically eradicated Christian faith and culture, to the point where even the people's language changed to Arabic.

In 1071, a very important battle occurred near that little town of Manzikert. The Seljuk Turks, who were Muslim, destroyed a Christian Byzantine army. Within 20 years, the Turks had overrun 80 percent of Asia Minor. And that wiped out the source of most of the Byzantine Empire's manpower, food and economic strength.

That's why, despite the Great Schism between eastern and western Christianity, which had occurred only a few decades before, the Byzantine Emperor turned to the Pope for help. And that's why the Pope preached the First Crusade in 1095 – to help deliver Christians in the east from Muslim persecution.

My point is this: The Crusades didn't take place in a vacuum. They were part of a much larger and longer religious struggle, in which terrible things happened on both sides. For nine centuries, the Hagia Sophia – the Church of Holy Wisdom in Constantinople – was the greatest Christian Church in the world. When the Ottoman Turks took the city in 1453, they immediately seized it and converted it to a mosque. They did that for religious reasons. They were asserting their militant Islamic faith. And therefore in judging the sins and mistakes of the Crusades, we should also remember that the Muslim concept of jihad predated the Christian concept of Crusade by more than three centuries.

Some Crusaders were saints. Too many were sinners. Some were monsters, and most were probably the same mix of virtue and clay we find in ourselves. We know today that imposing the truth on people through violence or any other kind of intimidation betrays God's love and violates the dignity of His children. But the Crusaders can't finally be judged without an accurate understanding of their historical context – which, rightly or wrongly, they often perceived as a struggle for Christian survival against an aggressive alien religion.

What's any of this got to do with us, today? Actually a lot, especially when it comes to building a culture of life. Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (Jn 8:32). The culture of life emerges from a culture of truth; and therefore memory and history should be exercises in seeking and telling the truth about the past.

This is why John Paul II wrote that ". . . acknowledging the weaknesses of the past is an act of honesty and courage which helps us to strengthen our faith" (TMA, 33). It's why the International Theological Commission wrote last year that the purification of memory — which involves remembering, acknowledging, and repenting of our sins while trusting completely in the power of truth — begins a process of reconciliation which "opens a new tomorrow for everyone."

Memory is powerful. Purified memory is the voice of learned truth. Purified memory is neither the denial of our mistakes – after all, when we have God's mercy, we have no need to hide our own sinfulness — nor is it the distortion and overemphasis of our mistakes, which informs so much of the secular criticism of Christian history, including the Crusades.

Personal renewal comes from remembering the past honestly, turning away from the sins we find there, and beginning again in humility. The same applies to nations. When God gives Israel the shema in Deuteronomy 6:4 – "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one" – He tells His people to "bind [my commands] as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the door posts of your house and on your gates" (Dt 6:8-9). God inscribes on the heart of Israel, His presence. God imprints on the memory of Israel, His commands. And He follows that with a warning and a promise:

"See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you this day, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in His ways and by keeping His commandments and His statutes and His ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you this day that you shall perish" (Dt 30:15-18).

The roots of the "culture of death" in America 2000 are located right here — in our flight from the presence of God and the memory of who we are in relationship to Him. We've become a people who dislike the past, not because it's obsolete or uninteresting, but because the past imposes obligations on us which are rooted in what's gone before; it reveals who we are, and we don't want to be revealed; and it cannot be changed, which offends our desire for power.

The historian and social critic Christopher Lasch once observed that, "To live for the moment is the prevailing passion [of Americans in our lifetime] — to live for yourself, not for your predecessor or posterity. We are fast losing the sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future." The result, said Lasch, is a resentment and resistance to bearing children; a hunger to delay the process of aging; a focus on material fulfillment; the rise of greed and callousness; and a relentless cult of the self.

Lasch wrote those words nearly 30 years ago in a book he called *The Culture of Narcissism*. And the proof of his argument is around us everywhere today. In a single six-month period in late 1999 and early 2000, *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* ran major cover stories on "Teenseltown" — the desperation of young women models in their 20s trying to look like they're even younger, preferably in their mid-teens; "Racing Toward Immortality" — the promise of living virtually forever, or at least a lot longer, through stem-cell research and organ transplants; "The Backlash Against Children" which pretty much explains itself; and "Better Loving Through Chemistry: The Search for the Female Viagra and Other Tales from the Second Sexual Revolution," which I think I can leave to your imagination.

The unintended result of our prosperity and technological advances is a consumer economy which deliberately creates new needs — and then provides the products and experiences to fulfill them. It's a culture entirely focused on the cultivation and satisfaction of personal appetites, no matter how much damage is done to our vocabulary of values in the process. Toshiba now markets its latest laptop computer as the real meaning of freedom. Of course, the real real meaning of freedom — the freedom built on personal restraint, self-giving and moral character which John Paul II talks about in the *Gospel of Life* and elsewhere, is barely part of our national conversation any longer.

The reason is simple. Restraint gets in the way of production and consumption. The gods we serve are no longer called "Baal" . . . but he's certainly still around in whatever brand-name luxuries and indulgences we care to put in his place. The effect is the same: a forgetfulness of our relationship with the true God, a flight from memory and history into the illusions of the present, and along with it, a refusal to be responsible for the future.

The heart of this culture consists of three sins. The first is pride. Francis Bacon once said that "knowledge is power," and we've learned to believe in that principle because of the success of our science and technology, and the accumulation of our wealth. For however long it lasts, we're still the only superpower on the planet.

The second sin is fear. When you have a lot of stuff, you have a lot of stuff to lose. As a culture we're preoccupied with getting more — and protecting what we already own. We also suspect — rightly — that most of the rest of the world wants what we have. The fear of losing what we have spills over into a fear of sharing what we have. The population warfare we bankroll in many parts of the developing world is an expression of that fear.

And this leads to the third sin: anger. In a culture which exalts the self, all selves are finally in competition. Community is based on a shared past, a shared memory, shared principles which are larger than the individual self, and a shared commitment to the future. If the premise of a society is "create your own meaning," no common purpose is possible for long. Competition becomes conflict, and conflict creates violence and more anger.

Abortions and all the other acts of violence against human dignity which Catholics work so hard to prevent begin right here in this trinity of pride, fear and anger. What can we do about it? How can we heal it? How do we build a culture of life?

The good news is: It's doable. The not-so-good news is: We can't "quick-fix" our way out of a problem we behaved ourselves into.

We need to inscribe on our souls the very first words Jesus speaks in the Gospel of Mark: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel." Sounds easy, but it's not. It's accomplished in the hard, daily struggle with ourselves to wake up from the culture of death which our own selfishness has helped to create.

We need to pray for humble hearts, because humility is the beginning of sanity. We need to pray for grateful hearts, because gratitude creates joy. We need to pray for faithful hearts, because fidelity is the seed of courage. And we need to pray for repentant and forgiving hearts, because these make justice and mercy possible . . . and justice and mercy are the food for brotherhood and real community — the world God intended for us.

In the Gospel from today's Liturgy, Jesus finally loses patience with the multitude questioning Him and says, "You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" (Lk 12:56). Those are strong words. They reminded me of a front page story that appeared in the Sunday New York Times a few months ago about Denmark. It reported on the growing insecurity Danes feel about their national identity. As the story began, a number of Danes were quoted complaining about the proposed new Eurodollar and the loss of their traditional Danish currency.

But as the story progressed, the real anxiety emerged. Denmark has a great many Turkish immigrants who speak Danish, but as Muslims, they share very little else of Danish culture. Native Danes are overwhelmingly Lutheran, but they rarely attend church. They also have a very low birthrate. Turkish Danes have much larger families and are steadily growing as a percentage of the population.

This same story could be written about every country in Western Europe. The traditional European cultures we know, are dying. They're choosing to die by choosing their own selfishness, by forgetting God, by forgetting the dignity of human life, by attacking and dismantling the Christian memories, history and culture which once gave them life.

Jesus said: "You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

Remember who you are, and why God created you. Purify your memory through repentance — not to focus on your sins, but to be free of them, the better to evangelize. Be open to new life. Encourage and support that openness in others. And teach your children to know and love Jesus Christ. That's the single most important thing you can do to build the culture of life. Remember Deuteronomy 30:19: ". . . choose life, that you and your descendants may live." Inscribe those words on your heart.

And with them, inscribe these:

"You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (Jn 8:32), and, "I am the way, the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6).

The culture of life emerges from a culture of truth. The word of God — the word of life spoken in Deuteronomy — is the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ. God grant us the courage to conform our lives to His.