



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

Addresses

Public Life and the Lay Vocation

Mexico City, September 26, 2009

A symposium entitled: "Voices: The Lay State and Religious Liberty" gathered religious liberty experts from throughout North America to analyze this fundamental human right as defined in international human rights law. Archbishop Chaput was unable to attend the symposium, but his spokesperson Luis Soto delivered the following remarks. The Voices Symposium was organized by the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, under the auspices of the Archdiocese of Mexico and sponsored by the Knights of Columbus.

I very much regret that I cannot be with you in person today, because I've admired Cardinal Rivera, the Knights of Columbus and the Becket Fund for many years. Duties in my home state of Colorado keep me here. I've asked Mr. Luis Soto, one of my senior counselors, to deliver my remarks on my behalf. In a way, his presence representing me may be more useful than anything I can say in my prepared comments.

Mr. Soto was born in Mexico. His wife was born in Venezuela. Both of his children were born in the United States and are therefore American citizens. Next year, Mr. Soto and his wife will become citizens of the United States. If you want a picture of the future of the Catholic faith in North America, Luis and his family embody it. I have great confidence in Luis. He speaks for me at this gathering, and I know he will make a strong personal contribution to your discussions.

I want to start by thanking the organizers of this conference for having the courage to do it. I served two terms as a Commissioner with the U. S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Congress in my country created the commission 1998. It exists under federal law to support religious freedom around the world as a basic human right.

I saw three things during my service: First, most countries claim to respect religious freedom. Second, many countries lie. They actually restrict religious freedom, and many other nations don't see it as an important issue. And third, unless ordinary lay citizens work vigorously and without apologies in public life to protect their religious liberty, they lose it.

Cardinal Rivera, the Knights of Columbus and the Becket Fund all know this simple fact: Politics is the arena where the struggle between truth and lies, justice and injustice, takes place. No country's political life can be honest -- and no government can serve the needs of its people -- unless it welcomes the deepest convictions of its citizens into public debate.

In any nation, but especially in a nation of Catholics, Catholic people have a duty to bring their Catholic beliefs to bear on every social, economic and political problem facing their country. That's not just a privilege. It's not just a right. It's a demand of the Gospel. Obviously, we have an obligation to respect other people and their own rights. We're always bound to treat other people with charity, justice and prudence. But that can never be an excuse for our own silence.

Unless we live our faith not just in our private practices, but also in our public actions, including our political involvement, then we're living a lie. We're lying to ourselves, because we're not really serious about our faith unless we have the zeal and the courage to witness it. And we're also cheating our fellow citizens. In a democracy, the best gift any of us can give to our country is the public witness of our convictions. Democracy depends on an honest, unashamed, public struggle of ideas. If

we withhold our religious and moral beliefs from our nation's political debates because of a misguided sense of good manners, we are not being "polite." On the contrary: We're stealing from the public conversation.

I have three simple points I want to talk about today: the nature of the state; the nature of our Christian faith; and the nature of the lay vocation. But before I do that, I need to offer two caveats.

Here's the first caveat. *I love my country.* Some of you know that I belong to the Potawatomi Indian tribe through my mother. I take pride in that. Because of it, I am very well aware of the sins and flaws of American history - both toward the native peoples of the United States, and often toward other countries, including those in Latin America. But I also know the great generosity and goodness in my country, and the genius of America's political institutions. I take pride in that, as well.

My comments today are shaped by my life as a Catholic bishop in the United States. Mexican and U.S. histories have many differences in culture, language, religion, politics and law. These differences are important. So not everything I say may be useful to the needs of this conference.

But I also believe in the truth at the heart of *Ecclesia in America*: We are *one* continent, *one* Church and one community of believers in *one* Lord -- Jesus Christ. These aren't just elegant words for me. I had the great gift of serving as a delegate named by Pope John Paul II to the 1997 Synod for America. What I learned there is this: The Gospel of Jesus Christ has no future in America unless that future is built and shared and suffered for by all of us together as one family of faith. The unity we have in our baptism is deeper and stronger than any of our differences. So I ask you, as patient members of my family, to use what is helpful in my words, and ignore what isn't.

Here's my second caveat. *No bishop, priest or deacon can do the work that properly belongs to laypeople.* My job as a bishop is to be a good pastor - in other words, a good shepherd and guide for the people of my local Church. The word "pastor" means "shepherd" in Latin, and it comes from the Latin verb *pascere*, which means "to feed." My proper work is to teach the faith, preach the Gospel, encourage and console my people, correct them when needed, and govern the internal life of the Church with love and justice.

There may be many times when a bishop or group of bishops needs to speak out publicly about the moral consequences of a public issue. But the main form of Catholic leadership in wider society - in the nation's political, economic and social life - needs to be done by the Catholic lay faithful. The key word of course is *faithful*. We need to form Catholic lay leaders who know and love the teachings of the Church, and then embody those teachings in their private lives and their public service. But once those lay leaders exist, the clergy cannot and should not interfere with the leadership that rightly belongs, by baptism, to their vocation as lay apostles.

Having said all this, let's talk now about those three simple points I mentioned: the nature of the state; the nature of our Christian faith; and the nature of the lay vocation.

Here's my first point: *the nature of the state.* I said a moment ago that I love my country. And I know that all of you love your countries. For Christians, patriotism is a virtue. Love for the best qualities in our homeland is a noble thing. This is why military service and public office are not just socially useful vocations, but - at their best - good and honorable ones.

Beginning in the New Testament and continuing right through documents of the Second Vatican Council, Christians have always believed that civil authority has a rightful degree of autonomy separate from sacred authority. Even in countries where historically the Church and state had close ties, secular rulers were never fully subordinated to religious leadership. This is one of the deepest and most important differences between Christian and Muslim political thought, even today.

As philosopher Rémi Brague writes in *The Law of God: The Philosophical History of An Idea, the two world religions*

with a "political" dimension did not acquire it in the same way. Christianity gained ground in the ancient world against the political power of the Roman Empire, which had persecuted Christians for almost three centuries before itself adopting the Christian religion. Islam, after a brief period of trials, triumphed during the lifetime of its founder. It then conquered, by warfare, the right to operate in peace, and even the right to dictate conditions of survival to

the adepts of other religions "of the Book." In modern terms we might say that *Christianity conquered the state through civil society; Islam, to the contrary, conquered civil society through the state* (emphasis in original).

In fact, Brague notes that, "from the start, Christianity set itself outside the political domain, and its founding texts bear witness to a distrust of things political."

In Christian thought, believers owe civil rulers their respect and obedience in all things that do not gravely violate the moral law. When Jesus told the Pharisees and Herodians to "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (see Mt 22:15-21), he was acknowledging that Caesar does have rights. Of course, he was *also* saying that Caesar is not a god, and Caesar has no rights over those things which belong to God.

To put it in modern terms: *The state is not god*. It's not immortal. It's not infallible. It's not even synonymous with civil society, which is vastly larger, richer and more diverse in its human relationships than any political party or government bureaucracy can ever be. Ultimately, everything important about human life belongs not to Caesar, but to God: our intellect, our talents, our free will; the people we love; the beauty and goodness in the world; our soul, our moral integrity, our hope for eternal life. These are the things that matter. These are the things worth fighting for. And none of them comes from the state.

As a result, the key virtue modern political leaders need to learn, and Catholic citizens need to *help* them learn by demanding it, is modesty - modesty of appetite, and modesty in the exercise of power. The sovereignty of states is a good principle. But every state is subject to higher and binding truths. These truths are embodied not just in Christianity and Judaism, but also in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - which enshrines the right of every human being to freedom of belief; freedom of religious practice; freedom of religious teaching and public expression; freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom to receive and impart information and ideas through any media; and the right to take an active part in the government of one's own country (see Articles 18-21). Any state that interferes with these basic rights undermines its own legitimacy.

Here's my second point: *the nature of our Christian faith*. Catholics believe that each human life has a unique but interrelated meaning. We were made by God to receive love ourselves, and *to show love to others*. That's why we're here. That's our purpose. And it has very practical consequences - including the political kind. For a Christian, love is not simply an emotion. Real love is an act of the will; a sustained choice that proves itself not just by what we say or feel, but by *what we do for the good of others*.

Since God created all human persons and guarantees their dignity by his Fatherhood, we have family duties to one another. That applies especially within the Church, but it extends to the whole world. This means our faith has social as well as personal implications. And those social implications include the civil dimension of our shared life; in other words, the content of our politics.

The Catholic faith, to be genuine, *is always personal but never private*. In the Decalogue, the first three Commandments govern our relationship with God; but the next seven outline our obligations to other people. The Epistle of James warns us that faith without works is dead (1:22), and to be doers of the word and not hearers only (2:17). John's Gospel says that we will know the truth, and the truth *will make us free* (8:32) -- not comfortable; and not respected; but *free* in the real sense of the word: able to see and do what's right.

That Christian freedom is meant to be used in the service of others. Working to defend the sanctity of human persons and the dignity of the human family is an obligation of Christian freedom. St. Augustine wrote that the state not governed by justice is no more than a gang of thieves. So it's here, in the search for justice, that the Catholic citizen engages the political world because, as Benedict XVI says in *Deus Caritas Est*, "justice is both the aim and the intrinsic criterion of all politics." In fact, the just ordering of society and the state "is the central responsibility of politics."

God's kingdom is not of this world. Nothing we can do will change that. But Jesus never absolved us from resisting and healing the evil in the world. He never excused us from solidarity with the poor, the hungry, the unborn child, the immigrant, the broken families and the disabled persons who bear the burden of selfish nations and societies.

The Church cannot be silent in public life and be faithful to Jesus Christ at the same time. She needs

to be a mustard seed in the public square, transforming every fiber of a nation's political, economic and social life. We need to remember this fundamental democratic fact: *Working respectfully and firmly to form the public conscience violates no one's free will.* Actively witnessing to our convictions and advancing what we believe about key moral issues in public life is not "coercion." It's honesty. It's truth-telling. It's vital to the health of every democracy. And it's also a duty -- not only of our Catholic faith, but also of our citizenship.

Here's my third and final point: *the nature of the lay vocation.* In May this year, speaking to a pastoral convention of the Diocese of Rome, Benedict XVI made a comment that many people overlooked. But I think his words have exactly the spirit that needs to guide this conference.

He said that the Church needs "a change in mindset, particularly concerning laypeople. They must no longer be viewed as 'collaborators' of the clergy, but truly recognized as 'co-responsible' for the Church's being and action, thereby fostering the consolidation of a mature and committed laity."

Christians are in the world, but not of the world. We belong to God, and our home is heaven. But we're here for a reason: to *change* the world, *for the sake of* the world, in the name of Jesus Christ. That work belongs *to each of us.* Nobody will do it for us. And the idea that we can somehow accomplish that work without engaging -- in a hands-on way -- the laws, the structures, the public policies, the habits of mind and the root causes that sustain injustice in our countries, is a delusion.

Laypeople are not second-class disciples in this task. They're not second-class members of the Body of Christ. There is no such creature as a "second-class" Christian. Baptism is a sacrament of redemption; but also of equality in God's love. Laypeople have *exactly the same dignity* as clergy and religious -- and this moment in history cries out for mature, intelligent, zealous and faithful lay leaders in an urgent way.

Priests and bishops cannot do the work of laypeople. That's not what Christ called us to do. It's not what the Church formed us to do. Our role as clergy in bringing Jesus Christ to the world, and the world to Jesus Christ, flows through you lay men and women who hear the Word of God; who love the Church for the truth she teaches; and then bring that Catholic witness into society to change it and sanctify it in Christ's name.

Every Christian life, and every choice in every Christian life, *matter eternally.* Laypeople, not clergy, have the task of evangelizing the secular world, and only you can do it as God intended.

So never be embarrassed by your baptism. Never be afraid of the consequences of your faith. Take pride in your Catholic identity for the blessing and mandate it is. Act on it. Share it with others. More than any other country in this hemisphere, Mexico and its soil have been made holy by the blood of martyrs. All of us who are Catholic in America, north and south, need to revere that gift. We need to find in it once again the confidence to live and preach our faith - in everything we do -- without apologies or excuses. And if we do that, then we won't need to ask what the "new evangelization" looks like. *We'll know* - because we'll be incarnating it in our lives.

Thank you, and God bless you.

Most Reverend Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap., is the archbishop of Denver and a former two-term member of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.