Politics, morality, and a president: an American view

English text originally published by Catholic News Agency (www.catholicnewsagency.com), October 6, 2009

Archbishop Chaput of Denver contests some of the positive assertions made by Cardinal Georges Cottier about President Obama's appearance at Notre Dame in May of 2009. Cardinal Cottier's original reflections were published in July 2009 in the international Catholic magazine "30 Days." An archived version of the column is available online at http://www.30giorni.it/us/

One of the strengths of the Church is her global perspective. In that light, Cardinal Georges Cottier's recent essay on President Barack Obama ("Politics, morality and original sin," 30 Days, No. 5), made a valuable contribution to Catholic discussion of the new American president. Our faith connects us across borders. What happens in one nation may have an impact on many others. World opinion about America's leaders is not only appropriate; it should be welcomed.

And yet, the world does not live and vote in the United States. Americans do. The pastoral realities of any country are best known by the local bishops who shepherd their people. Thus, on the subject of America's leaders, the thoughts of an American bishop may have some value. They may augment the Cardinal's good views by offering a different perspective.

Note that I speak here only for myself. I do not speak for the bishops of the United States as a body, nor for any other individual bishop. Nor will I address President Obama's speech to the Islamic world, which Cardinal Cottier mentions in his own essay. That would require a separate discussion.

I will focus instead on the President's graduation appearance at the University of Notre Dame, and Cardinal Cottier's comments on the President's thinking. I have two motives in doing so.

First, men and women from my own diocese belong to the national Notre Dame community as students, graduates and parents. Every bishop has a stake in the faith of the people in his care, and Notre Dame has never merely been a local Catholic university. It is an icon of the American Catholic experience. Second, when Notre Dame's local bishop vigorously disagrees with the appearance of *any* speaker, and some 80 other bishops and 300,000 laypeople around the country publicly support the local bishop, then reasonable people must infer that a real problem exists with the speaker – or at least with his appearance at the disputed event. Reasonable people might further choose to defer to the judgment of those Catholic pastors closest to the controversy.

Regrettably and unintentionally, Cardinal Cottier's articulate essay undervalues the gravity of what happened at Notre Dame. It also overvalues the consonance of President Obama's thinking with Catholic teaching.

There are several key points to remember here.

First, resistance to President Obama's appearance at Notre Dame had nothing to do with whether he is a good or bad man. He is obviously a gifted man. He has many good moral and political instincts, and an admirable devotion to his family. These things matter. But unfortunately, so does this: The President's views on vital bioethical issues, including but not limited to abortion, differ sharply from Catholic teaching. This is why he has enjoyed the strong support of major "abortion rights" groups for many years. Much is made, in some religious circles, of the President's sympathy for Catholic social teaching. But defense of the unborn child is a demand of social justice. There is no "social justice" if the youngest and weakest among us can be legally killed. Good programs for the poor are vital, but

they can never excuse this fundamental violation of human rights.

Second, at a different moment and under different circumstances, the conflict at Notre Dame might have faded away if the university had simply asked the President to give a lecture or public address. But at a time when the American bishops as a body had already voiced strong concern about the new administration's abortion policies, Notre Dame not only made the President the centerpiece of its graduation events, but also granted him an honorary doctorate of laws – this, despite his deeply troubling views on abortion law and related social issues.

The real source of Catholic frustration with President Obama's appearance at Notre Dame was his overt, negative public voting and speaking record on abortion and other problematic issues. By its actions, Notre Dame ignored and violated the guidance of America's bishops in their 2004 document, "Catholics in Political Life." In that text, the bishops urged Catholic institutions to refrain from honoring public officials who disagreed with Church teaching on grave matters.

Thus, the fierce debate in American Catholic circles this spring over the Notre Dame honor for Mr. Obama was not finally about partisan politics. It was about serious issues of Catholic belief, identity and witness – triggered by Mr. Obama's views -- which Cardinal Cottier, writing from outside the American context, may have misunderstood.

Third, the Cardinal wisely notes points of contact between President Obama's frequently stated search for political "common ground" and the Catholic emphasis on pursuing the "common good." These goals – seeking common ground and pursuing the common good – can often coincide. But they are not the same thing. They can sharply diverge in practice. So-called "common ground" abortion policies may actually *attack* the common good because they imply a false unity; they create a ledge of shared public agreement too narrow and too weak to sustain the weight of a real moral consensus. The common good is *never* served by tolerance for killing the weak – beginning with the unborn.

Fourth, Cardinal Cottier rightly reminds his readers of the mutual respect and cooperative spirit required by citizenship in a pluralist democracy. But pluralism is never an end in itself. It is never an excuse for inaction. As President Obama himself acknowledged at Notre Dame, democracy depends for its health on people of conviction fighting hard in the public square for what they believe – peacefully, legally but vigorously and without apologies.

Unfortunately, the President also added the curious remark that ". . . the ultimate irony of faith is that it necessarily admits doubt . . . This doubt should not push us away from our faith. But it should humble us." In a sense, of course, this is true: On this side of eternity, doubt is part of the human predicament. But doubt is the *absence* of something; it is not a positive value. Insofar as it inoculates believers from acting on the demands of faith, doubt is a fatal weakness.

The habit of doubt fits much too comfortably with a kind of "baptized unbelief;" a Christianity that is little more than a vague tribal loyalty and a convenient spiritual vocabulary. Too often in recent American experience, pluralism and doubt have become alibis for Catholic moral and political lethargy. Perhaps Europe is different. But I would suggest that our current historical moment -- which both European and American Catholics share -- is very far from the social circumstances facing the early Christian legislators mentioned by the Cardinal. They had faith, and they also had the zeal – tempered by patience and intelligence – to incarnate the moral content of their faith explicitly in culture. In other words, they were building a civilization shaped by Christian belief. Something very different is happening now.

Cardinal Cottier's essay gives witness to his own generous spirit. I was struck in particular by his praise for President Obama's "humble realism." I hope he's right. American Catholics *want* him to be right. Humility and realism are the soil where a commonsense, modest, human-scaled and moral politics can grow. Whether President Obama can provide this kind of leadership remains to be seen. We have a duty to pray for him -- so that he can, and does.

Most Reverend Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap., is the archbishop of Denver.