

Theological Reflection Religious Freedom

“Theological reflections” are designed to raise our minds to God, to his will and kingdom. As we reflect on the things of God we try to put those ideas and beliefs into practice in our spiritual lives. What we believe should be played out in the fabric of our lives. Our beliefs should count for something as we ultimately have to give an account of our lives to God. Our ethical/moral beliefs must bear fruit in our lives as family members, workers, and as citizens.

In these recent months our Catholic bishops, the magisterium of the Church, have taken a stand against an infringement on religious freedom. They defend religious freedom for all believers. If we believe that the Holy Spirit speaks through His Church and its teaching arm, then we must take note. As Christian citizens we are obliged to align ourselves with the entire body of bishops who have taken a bold stance in their call for the Fortnight of Prayer that formally ended on July 4th and with some bishops and their dioceses and universities suing the Federal Government. This is unprecedented.

Some Catholics think that our bishops should not get involved in politics, while others think we should not embarrass our President. When our government infringes on our God-given religious freedom, it is time to stand up against a growing tide of suppression of religion, religious symbols and our cherished beliefs. When our government and the courts of our land no longer honor the past harmony between our Christian citizenry and its government, then Christians must protest and change such governments.

I am going to quote heavily from a talk given by Archbishop Chaput of Philadelphia on July 26 of 2012, and from a talk given by Bishop Jenky of Peoria, Illinois Diocese on April 14, 2012.

The background of these two talks was due to the action of the President in January. That mandate was the final straw between Catholics and government leaders. The Fortnight of Freedom was a result of that mandate. Religious liberty is the first liberty granted to us by God and protected in the First Amendment to our Constitution. As you know Franciscan University, the Archdiocese of Washington D.C. and the Archdiocese of New York along with others are suing the Federal Government over this infringement on religious freedom.

This is not a talk about the sanctity of marriage. I will not list the states of our country or allude to the recent parliament decisions in New Zealand, Tasmania and Scotland that will legalize same sex marriages. But it is an example of the erosion of Christian morality.

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This is not a political talk per se, although you will see from the two talks given by two American Bishops that we must vote our Catholic conscience. Because every vote is important, especially here in Florida as we remember from the Bush-Gore election, Diane wants us to be informed and to form right consciences, to think with the Church and to heed what our much respected bishops and prominent cardinals are saying to us.

We all remember that those individuals who landed at Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620 had fled from England in order to practice their religion – to have religious freedom. That is the historical basis of our country's founding.

Those who founded our country as a political entity threw off England's domination. These founders, Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison and others were mainly Christian. Their moral framework was overwhelmingly shaped by Christian faith. And as Archbishop Chaput said in his talk, "Building a Culture of Religious Freedom," America was built by Christians who saw the value of publicly engaged religious faith because they had experienced its influence themselves. "They created a nation designed in advance to depend on the moral convictions of religious believers and to welcome their active role in public life." The Archbishop went on to make an important point: "The Founders also knew that religion is not just a matter of private conviction. It can't be reduced to personal prayer or Sunday worship. It has social implications. Christian faith demands preaching, teaching, public witness and service to others. It is not just freedom from repression but freedom for active discipleship. It includes the right of religious believers to engage society and to work actively in the public square."

"80% of Americans call themselves Christians. Religious practice remains high but in our courts, in our law making, in our popular entertainment and even in the way many of us live our daily lives, America is steadily growing more secular. Mainline churches are losing ground."

Many of our young people spurn Christianity. Many of our young adults lack a religious moral formation. Humanitarianism and secularism rampant in our country will effect a different American future very different from anything in our nation's past.

Archbishop Chaput continues, "Contempt for religious faith, has been growing in America's leadership classes for many decades as scholars have shown. But in recent years, government pressure on religious entities has become a pattern, and it goes well beyond the current administration's HHS (Health and Human Resources) mandate. It involves interfering with the

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conscience rights of medical providers, private employers and individual citizens. And it includes attacks on the policies, hiring practices and tax statuses of religious charities, hospitals and other ministries. These attacks are real. They are happening now. And they will get worse as America's religious character weakens."

65 years ago America's bishops spoke of the exile of God from public consciousness as the "root of the world's troubles today." They predicted "the effects of a life without God on the individual, the family, education, economic activity and the international community." Just because we live in a democracy does not mean that majority opinion determines what is good and true. Democracy can be turned against us. The forces of a mass culture can lower the tone of society. We are fighting a cultural war on issues like abortion, sexuality, marriage and the family and religious liberty. Others fight for these very rights in opposition.

We have to seek common ground where possible but we cannot compromise with grave evil.

The America of Catholic memory is not the America of the present moment or the emerging future. "Sooner or later, a nation based on a degraded notion of liberty, or license rather than real freedom – in other words, a nation of abortion, disordered sexuality, consumer greed and indifference to immigrant and the poor – will not be worthy of its founding ideas. And on that day that nation will have no claim on virtuous hearts."

Archbishop Chaput points to his own *boomer generation* that "has been so problematic in our nation's history because of the spirit of entitlement, moral superiority, their appetite for material comfort, unattached from humility, and their refusal to acknowledge personal sin and accept our obligations to the past."

He ends with this clarion call: "If we want a culture of religious freedom we need to begin here, today, now. We live it by giving ourselves wholeheartedly to God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, by loving God with a passion and joy, confidence and courage. And by holding nothing back. God will take care of the rest. Scripture says, "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. In the end, God is the builder. We are the living stones. The firmer our faith, the deeper our love, the purer our zeal for God's will – then the stronger the house of freedom will be that rises in our own lives and the life of our nation."

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The following excerpts are from the homily of Bishop Daniel R. Jenky, CSC, at the Mass during the April 14 "A Call to Catholic Men of Faith" in Peoria.

“There is no other explanation for Christianity. It should have died out and entirely disappeared when Christ died and was buried, except for the fact that Christ was truly risen, and that during the 40 days before his Ascension, he interacted with his Apostles and disciples, and on one occasion even with hundreds of his followers.

And Peter and John and all the Apostles, starting first in Jerusalem in Judea and Galilee and then to the very ends of the earth, announced the Resurrection and the Good News to everyone they encountered.

According to the clear testimony of the Scriptures, these Apostles had once been rather ordinary men – like you and me. Their faith hadn't always been strong. They made mistakes. They committed sins. They were often afraid and confused.

You know, it has never been easy to be a Christian and it's not supposed to be easy! The world, the flesh, and the devil will always love their own, and will always hate us. As Jesus once predicted, they hated me, they will certainly hate you.

But our Faith, when it is fully lived, is a fighting faith and a fearless faith. Grounded in the power of the resurrection, there is nothing in this world, and nothing in hell, that can ultimately defeat God's one, true, holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

For 2,000 years the enemies of Christ have certainly tried their best. But think about it. The Church survived and even flourished during centuries of terrible persecution, during the days of the Roman Empire.

The Church survived barbarian invasions. The Church survived wave after wave of Jihads. The Church survived the age of revolution. The Church survived Nazism and Communism.

And in the power of the resurrection, the Church will survive the hatred of Hollywood, the malice of the media, and the mendacious wickedness of the abortion industry.

The Church will survive the entrenched corruption and sheer incompetence of our Illinois state government, and even the calculated disdain of the President

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of the United States, his appointed bureaucrats in HHS, and of the current majority of the federal Senate.

May God have mercy on the souls of those politicians who pretend to be Catholic in church, but in their public lives, rather like Judas Iscariot, betray Jesus Christ by how they vote and how they willingly cooperate with intrinsic evil.

As Christians we must love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, but as Christians we must also stand up for what we believe and always be ready to fight for the Faith. The days in which we live now require heroic Catholicism, not casual Catholicism. We can no longer be Catholics by accident, but instead be Catholics by conviction.

In our own families, in our parishes, where we live and where we work – like that very first apostolic generation – we must be bold witnesses to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We must be a fearless army of Catholic men, ready to give everything we have for the Lord, who gave everything for our salvation.

Remember that in past history other governments have tried to force Christians to huddle and hide only within the confines of their churches like the first disciples locked up in the Upper Room.

In the late 19th century, Bismarck waged his “Kulturkampf,” a Culture War, against the Roman Catholic Church, closing down every Catholic school and hospital, convent and monastery in Imperial Germany.

Clemenceau, nicknamed “the priest eater,” tried the same thing in France in the first decade of the 20th Century.

Hitler and Stalin, at their better moments, would just barely tolerate some churches remaining open, but would not tolerate any competition with the state in education, social services, and health care.

In clear violation of our First Amendment rights, Barack Obama – with his radical, pro abortion and extreme secularist agenda, now seems intent on following a similar path.

Now things have come to such a pass in America that this is a battle that we could lose, but before the awesome judgment seat of Almighty God this is not a war where any believing Catholic may remain neutral.

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This fall, every practicing Catholic must vote, and must vote their Catholic consciences, or by the following fall our Catholic schools, our Catholic hospitals, our Catholic Newman Centers, all our public ministries -- only excepting our church buildings – could easily be shut down. Because no Catholic institution, under any circumstance, can ever cooperate with the intrinsic evil of killing innocent human life in the womb.

No Catholic ministry – and yes, Mr. President, for Catholics our schools and hospitals are ministries – can remain faithful to the Lordship of the Risen Christ and to his glorious Gospel of Life if they are forced to pay for abortions.

Now remember what was the life-changing experience that utterly transformed those fearful and quaking disciples into fearless, heroic apostles. They encountered the Risen Christ. They revered his sacred wounds. They ate and drank with him.

We have nothing to fear, but we have a world to win for him. We have nothing to fear, for we have an eternal destiny in heaven. We have nothing to fear, though the earth may quake, kingdoms may rise and fall, demons may rage, but St. Michael the Archangel, and all the hosts of heaven, fight on our behalf.

No matter what happens in this passing moment, at the end of time and history, our God is God and Jesus is Lord, forever and ever.

Christus vincit! Christus regnat! Christus imperat!

Christ wins! Christ reigns! Christ commands!”

So I end this talk with my own personal opinion and reflection. I firmly believe in the strong statements of Cardinal DiNardo of Houston, Archbishop Chaput of Philadelphia and Bishop Jenky of Peoria, Illinois. It is a call to do something – to vote our conscience – our Catholic conscience. People like Churchill and President Roosevelt faced the reality of Nazism and did everything in their power to defeat it even when many of their own countrymen wished for and believed in appeasement. As Catholics this is our chance to stem the tide when many of our own countrymen and friends are embracing the darkness of abortion, atheism, same sex marriage, corporate greed and contraception.

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Ronald Novotny, Ph.D., S.T.L.