

CHURCH AND STATE TODAY: WHAT BELONGS TO CAESAR, AND WHAT DOESN'T

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ARCHBISHOP CHARLES CHAPUT[†]

I always enjoy being with friends; tonight, I can leave my Kevlar vest in Denver. I do a lot of speaking, and while most of the people I meet are wonderful folks, not everyone is always happy to hear what I have to say.

In fact, one of the distinguishing marks of debate both outside and within the Church over the last forty years is how uncivil the disagreements have become. Being a faithful Catholic leader today—whether you're a layperson or clergy—isn't easy. It requires real skill, and in that regard, I've admired the great ability and good will of Bishop Murphy for many years. So it's a special pleasure to be with him tonight. New York's Cardinal Edward Egan is another leader who's given extraordinary and sometimes difficult service to the Church.

I'm not really surprised by the environment in our country or in our Church, because Msgr. George Kelly saw it coming thirty years ago. I read his great book, *The Battle for the American Church*, as a young Capuchin priest when it first came out in 1979. I remember being struck immediately by George's very Irish combination of candor, scrappiness, clarity, intelligence, and also finally charity—because everything he wrote, said, and did was always motivated by his love for the Church.

I also remember George's sense of humor, which was vivid and healthy, and which probably kept him so generous and sane. He was a man's man and a priest's priest—and his commitment to Catholic family life, Catholic education, and Catholic scholarship has remained with me as an example throughout my priesthood. George and I became friends through our mutual

[†] O.F.M. Cap., Archbishop of Denver.

friend Father Ronald Lawler, O.F.M. Cap., and after I became a bishop in South Dakota, he would often call me or write me with his advice—and I was always happy to get it, because it was always very good. So I'm grateful for a chance to acknowledge my debt to him.

We have a full evening, so I'll be very brief. I want to quickly sketch for you the picture of an anonymous culture—but everything I'm about to tell you comes from the factual record.

This society is advanced in the sciences and the arts. It has a complex economy and a strong military. It includes many different religions, although religion tends to be a private affair, or a matter of civic ceremony.

This particular society also has big problems. Among them is that fertility rates remain below replacement levels. There aren't enough children being born to replenish the current adult population and to do the work needed to keep society going. The government offers incentives to encourage people to have more babies, but nothing seems to work.

Promiscuity is common and accepted—so are bisexuality, homosexuality, and prostitution. Birth control and abortion are legal, widely practiced, and justified by society's leading intellectuals.

Every now and then, a lawmaker introduces a measure to promote marriage, arguing that the health and future of society depend on stable families. These measures typically go nowhere.

Ok. What society am I talking about? Our own country, of course, would broadly fit this description. But I'm not talking about us.

I've just outlined the conditions of the Mediterranean world at the time of Christ. We tend to idealize the ancients, to look back at Greece and Rome as an age of extraordinary achievements—and of course, it was—but it had another side as well.

We don't usually think of Plato and Aristotle endorsing abortion or infanticide as state policy—but they did. Hippocrates, the great medical pioneer, also famously created an abortion kit that included sharp blades for cutting up the fetus and a hook for ripping it from the womb. We rarely connect that with his Hippocratic Oath—but some years ago, archeologists discovered the remains of what appeared to be a Roman-era

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abortion or infanticide “clinic.” It was a sewer filled with the bones of more than 100 infants.

If you haven’t done so already, I would encourage you to pick up a little book written about ten years ago, *The Rise of Christianity* by the Baylor University scholar Rodney Stark. You’ll find all of this history in its pages and more.

But what does ancient Rome have to do with my topic tonight: the relationship of Church and state today?

Let me explain it this way: People often say we’re living during a “post-Christian” moment. That’s supposed to describe the fact that Western nations have abandoned or greatly downplayed their Christian heritage in recent decades. But our “post-Christian” moment actually looks a lot like the pre-Christian moment. The signs of our times in the developed nations—morally, intellectually, spiritually, and even demographically—are uncomfortably similar to the signs in the world at the time of the Incarnation.

Drawing lessons from history is a subjective business. There’s always the risk of oversimplifying.

But I do believe that the challenges we face as American Catholics today are very much like those faced by the first Christians—and it might help to have a little perspective on how they went about evangelizing their culture. They did such a good job that, within four-hundred years, Christianity was the world’s dominant religion and the foundation of Western civilization. If we can learn from that history, the more easily God will work through us to spark a new evangelization.

I’m not a historian or a sociologist, so I’ll leave it to others to fully evaluate Rodney Stark’s work. But Stark does address a couple of key questions: How did Christianity succeed? How was it able to accomplish so much so fast? Stark is not only a social scientist, but also a self-described agnostic. So he has no interest in talking about God’s will or the workings of the Holy Spirit. He focuses only on facts he can verify.

Stark concludes that Christian success flowed from two things: first, Christian doctrine, and second, people being faithful to that doctrine. Stark writes: “[A]n essential factor in the [Christian] religion’s success was what Christians believed. . . . And it was the way these doctrines took on actual

flesh, the way they directed organizational actions and individual behavior, that led to the rise of Christianity.”¹

Let’s put it in less academic terms: The Church, through the Apostles and their successors, preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ. People believed in the Gospel, but they weren’t just agreeing to a set of ideas. Believing in the Gospel meant changing their whole way of thinking and living. It was a radical transformation—so radical they couldn’t go on living like the people around them anymore.

Stark shows that one of the key areas in which Christians rejected the culture around them was marriage and the family. From the start, to be a Christian meant believing that sex and marriage were sacred. From the start, to be a Christian meant rejecting abortion, infanticide, birth control, divorce, homosexual activity, and marital infidelity—all those things widely practiced by their Roman neighbors.

Athenagoras, a Christian layman, told the Emperor Marcus Aurelius in the year A.D. 176 that abortion was “murder” and that those involved would have to “give an account to God.” And he told the emperor the reason why: For we “regard the very fœtus in the womb as a created being, and therefore an object of God’s care”²

As this audience already knows, Christian reverence for the unborn child is no medieval development. It comes from the very beginnings of our faith. The early Church had no debates over politicians and communion. There wasn’t any need. No persons who tolerated or promoted abortion would have dared to approach the Eucharistic table, let alone dared to call themselves true Christians.

And here’s why: The early Christians understood that they were the offspring of a new worldwide family of God. They saw the culture around them as a culture of death, a society that was slowly extinguishing itself. In fact, when you read early Christian literature, practices like adultery and abortion are often described as part of “the way of death” or the “way of the devil.”

¹ RODNEY STARK, *THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY* 2, 211 (HarperCollins 1997).

² Athenagoras, *A Plea for Christians*, ch. XXXV, reprinted in 2 *THE ANTE-NICENE FATHERS* 147 (Rev. Alexander Roberts, Sir James Donaldson & Arthur Cleveland Coxe eds., 2007).

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There's an interesting line in a second century apologetic work written by Minucius Felix. He was a Roman lawyer and a convert. He's talking about a birth-control drug that works as an abortifacient. He describes its effects this way: "[T]here are women who swallow drugs to stifle in their own womb the beginnings of a [person] to be"³

That's what the first Christians saw around them in their world. They believed the world was snuffing out its own future. It was stifling future generations before they could come to be. It was slowly killing itself.

Since we see similar signs in our own day, we need to find the courage those first Christians had in challenging their culture. We need to believe not only what they believed. We need to believe those things with the same deep fervor.

The early Christians staked their lives on the belief that God is our Father. They respected Caesar, but they didn't confuse him with God, and they put God first. They believed the Church is our mother. They believed their bishops and priests were spiritual fathers and that through the sacraments they were made children of God, or "partakers of the divine nature,"⁴ as Peter said.

It's time for all of us who claim to be "Catholic" to recover our Catholic identity as disciples of Jesus Christ and missionaries of his Church. In the long run, we serve our country best by remembering that we're citizens of heaven first. We're better Americans by being more truly Catholic—and the reason why, is that unless we live our Catholic faith authentically, with our whole heart and our whole strength, we have nothing worthwhile to bring to the public debates that will determine the course of our nation.

Pluralism in a democracy doesn't mean shutting up about inconvenient issues. It means speaking up—respectfully, in a spirit of justice and charity, but also vigorously and without apologies. Jesus said that we will know the truth, and the truth will make us free. He didn't say anything about our being popular with worldly authority once we have that freedom. In the end, if we want our lives to be fruitful, we need to know ourselves as God intends us to be known—as his witnesses on

³ THE OCTAVIUS OF MARCUS MINUCIUS FELIX 107–08 (G.W. Clarke trans., 1974).

⁴ 2 *Peter* 1:4 (Rev. Standard Version, Catholic ed.).

earth, not just in our private behavior, but in our public actions, including our social, economic, and political choices.

If pagan Rome could be won for Jesus Christ, surely we can do the same in our own world. What it takes is the zeal and courage to live what we claim to believe. All of us here tonight already have that desire in our hearts. So let's pray for each other, and encourage each other, and get down to the Lord's work.