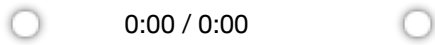




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The Urgency of Religious Freedom

ARCHBISHOP CHARLES J. CHAPUT, O.F.M. CAP.



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The Religious Freedom Institute honored Philadelphia's Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap., at its annual dinner, November 9, for his decades-long commitment to religious liberty. The following is adapted from his remarks.

As I was getting ready for tonight, I remembered a line from the Israeli peace negotiator who said that pessimists are simply optimists with experience. Experience is an unsentimental teacher. Between an eccentric White House, and a crop of Democratic candidates with crippled memories of what real socialism actually accomplished in the last century—mass murder, destroyed cultures, and ruined economies—the temptation today to pessimism can be very strong. The good news is that hope is quite different from optimism, because it's rooted in a God who is outside and greater than ourselves.

Hope is a virtue. Like all virtues, it requires a certain amount of courage. In the Christian tradition, the trinity of virtues we call faith, hope, and charity should shape everything we do, both privately and in our public lives. Faith in God gives us hope in our future here, and also in eternal life. Hope casts out fear and enables us to love. And the love of God and of human persons—the virtue of charity—is the animating spirit of all authentically Christian political action. By love I don't mean "love" in a soft or indulgent sense, the kind of empty love that offers "tolerance" as an alibi for inaction in the face of evil. I mean love in the deepest sense; love with a heart of courage; love determined to build justice in society and focused on the true good of the whole human person, body and soul.

The word “progress” has an interesting history; it comes from the Latin words *progressus* and *progrēdi* which mean “advance” and “to move forward.” Human progress, human advancement, is a good and desirable thing; but it means more than getting more stuff, more entitlements, and more personal license. Real progress always includes man’s spiritual nature. Real progress also satisfies the human hunger for solidarity and communion. So when our leaders and their slogans urge us to move “forward”—as they do every four years—we need to take a very hard look at the road we’re on, where the road “forward” leads, and whether it ennoble the human soul, or just aggravates our selfishness and our appetite for things.

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The reality of our public life is that Catholics—and I suspect most religious believers in the United States—can live quite peacefully with the separation of our religious structures and authorities from the power of the state. But the arrangement only works if it translates into real religious freedom. Freedom of religion, as the Founders understood it and Americans have always lived it, is not the same thing as freedom of worship.

A faithful married man is ruled in every aspect of his life, both public and private, by the commitment he makes to his wife. Anything less in his behavior is infidelity and hypocrisy. The same applies to our relationship with God. The state has a legitimate zone of its own secular authority in service to the community. But no zone of human activity, public or private, including the state, is free from the ultimate sovereignty of God. A state without a reverence for the religious dimension of man and its permeating role in human affairs is just another form of

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The point is this: We can never accept a separation of our religious faith and moral convictions from our public ministries and our political engagement. It's impossible. Even trying to do so is crippling because it forces us to live schizophrenic lives—worshipping God at home and in our churches or synagogues or mosques, and worshipping the latest version of Caesar everywhere else. That turns our private convictions into lies that we tell to each other and to ourselves. It's a convenient moral narcotic, but it has nothing to do with real religious faith. And that habit of lying, which is now pandemic in our public discourse, in our news media, and in our national political candidates, poisons not just our personal integrity but the life of the whole political community.

Religious freedom is the cornerstone of a free, honest, and morally vigorous society. We need to fight for it. This is why we need the Religious Freedom Institute, and why its service to our nation is so vitally important.

Photo credit: Catholic News Agency



By [Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.](#)

Most Reverend Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap., is the archbishop of Philadelphia. Before his appointment to Philadelphia by Pope Benedict in 2011, he served as bishop of Rapid City, South Dakota and archbishop of Denver. He is the author of three books: *Living the Catholic Faith: Rediscovering the Basics* (2001); *Render Unto Caesar: Serving the Nation by Living Our Catholic Beliefs in Political Life* (2008) and *Strangers in a Strange Land* (2017)

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time and then vanishes.” (James 4:14)

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