

Archbishop: No Law Can Protect Religious Freedom, if People Don't Defend It

Philadelphia's Shepherd Discusses the Essence of

Dignitatis Humanae

by Joan Frawley Desmond

In an address on the state of religious freedom in the United States and across the globe, Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia targeted the shifting semantics that obscure objective truth, as church-state tensions escalate and U.S. society debates new definitions of human freedom and the family. During a March 17 lecture at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary, "Of Human Dignity: The Declaration on Religious Liberty at 50," Archbishop Chaput addressed the concerns of Vatican II Fathers who approved the landmark document on religious liberty, "*Dignitatis Humanae*," a half century ago. But he also noted the changing context of public discourse and singled out "marriage equality," a term that is widely used as a euphemism for same-sex "marriage," as an example of "dishonest" political language that blurs, rather than clarifies, the subject at hand.

"The biggest problem we face as a culture isn't gay marriage or global warming. It's not abortion funding or federal debt," said Archbishop Chaput. "The deeper problem, the one that's crippling us, is that we use words like 'justice,' 'rights,' 'freedom' and 'dignity' without any commonly shared meaning to their content. We speak the same language, but the words don't mean the same thing. Our public discourse never gets down to what is true and what isn't, because it can't. Our most important debates boil down to who can deploy the best words in the best way to get power," he said. "Words like 'justice' have emotional throw weight, so people use them as weapons. And it can't be otherwise, because the religious vision and convictions that once animated American life are no longer welcome at the table."

Faith Accessible to Reason

He suggested that the Natural Law principles affirmed in "*Dignitatis Humanae*," (Human Dignity) by the Second Vatican Council were rooted in a faith that was accessible to reason, and thus open to the experience and values of non-Christians and non-believers. Today, cultural elites often dismiss the truths of faith as an opinion, and they have redefined religious freedom as freedom of worship. "After all, what can 'human rights' mean if science sees nothing transcendent in the human species? Or if science imagines a trans-humanist future? Or if science doubts that a uniquely human 'nature' even exists?" he asked. "If there is no inherent human nature, there can be no inherent natural rights – and then the grounding of our whole political system is a group of empty syllables." This thinking, said Archbishop Chaput, has gradually undermined public respect for free-exercise rights. But they would not go unchallenged in the public square or in the courts or state legislatures if the majority of Americans remained deeply engaged in their faith and defended it.

Halting Government Overreach

While the U.S. bishops have decried brutal attacks on Christians in the Middle East and Africa, among other countries, they have also opposed the Obama administrations attempt to narrow exemptions for religious non-profits, among other concerns. Catholic leaders have spoken out against the Health and Human Services' abortion and contraception mandate, as well as a new initiative by the White House to require all religious non-profits that receive government funds to provide services to undocumented minors to provide emergency contraception and abortion referrals.

While the U.S. bishops have framed the administration's policy as a sharp departure from settled U.S. law, which has provided broad free-exercise protections for churches serving the needy. Archbishop Chaput stressed that overreach by the government would only be halted if Americans themselves deepened their own faith and respect for religious freedom. Further he offered these insights as the U.S. Supreme Court prepares to hear oral arguments regarding the constitutionality of state laws that effectively ban same-sex "marriage." Church leaders fear that changes in the nation's marriage laws could threaten the free-exercise rights of religious institutions and individual believers. But some proposed bills designed to protect churches and small business owners have been blocked by partisan groups, who frame such legislation as a license to discriminate against homosexuals.

He emphasized a critical lesson of history: A strong religious belief is fundamental to a dynamic culture, and thus every American should be concerned with the country's fading religious practices and values. Still he said there is reason for optimism, but only if political discourse and reform are strongly anchored to inalienable truths about the dignity of the human person, made in the image of God. "We need to remember two simple facts," he said. "In practice, no law and no constitution can protect religious freedom unless people actually believe and live their faith – not just at home or in church, but in their public lives. But it's also true that no one can finally take our freedom, unless we give it away."

Emerging Challenges

Archbishop Chaput expressed a deep sense of hope that Americans will step up to confront the emerging challenges to religious freedom at home, as well as most brutal attacks on religious believers from the Islamic State group and other militant groups abroad, in addition to governments. "There's too much beauty in the world to lose hope; too many people searching for something more than themselves; too many people who comfort the suffering; too many people who serve the poor; too many people who seek and teach the truth; too much history that witnesses, again and again, to the mercy of God, incarnate in the course of human affairs," said Archbishop Chaput. "In the end there's too much evidence that God loves us, with a passion that is totally unreasonable and completely redemptive, to ever stop trusting in God's purpose for the world and for our lives."

He recalled that the Second Vatican Council took place within two decades of a devastating world war that witnessed a parallel war against the Jewish people and other vulnerable groups. "If there's an argument to be made against the worthiness of humanity, we've made that argument ourselves, again and again down the centuries, but especially in the modern age," he said. "Yet every one of the council documents is alive with confidence in God and in the dignity of man. And there's a reason: God makes greatness, not failures. He makes free men and women, not cowards," he concluded. "And when that miracle happens, even in just one of us, the world begins to change."

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