

## STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND

*2014 Erasmus Lecture**October 20, 2014**+Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.*

I've always had an affection for French Canada. My father's family began there. When I was growing up in Kansas in the 1950s, Quebec was deeply Catholic; one of the most profoundly Catholic cultures in the world. The province had 90 percent church attendance. Catholic education, health care and social services pervaded daily life.

I mention this for a reason. A young Catholic friend recently moved to Quebec from Washington, D.C., with her husband. And when she asked some of her new friends if they'd like to join her for Mass, the answer she got was: "What is a Mass?"

In 2014, barely 6 percent of Quebecers attend Sunday services. Only 9 percent of high-school age young people identify as Catholic. About 38 abortions occur for every 100 live births. Nearly half of newborn children go unbaptized. And many of those who *are* baptized will grow up without seeing the inside of a church. In just 50 years since Quebec's "Quiet Revolution" of the 1960s, an entire Catholic culture has collapsed.

None of this is news. *First Things* has been covering French Canada's religious terrain for two decades. And the fight over a "Quebec Charter of Values" earlier this year put Quebec's Catholic history back in the spotlight. But for anyone coming from the United States for the first time, the wreckage of Quebec's Catholic life – a once-great Church almost completely expunged from a people's daily environment -- can be a shock. And that shock ties us to our theme tonight: In the developed world, more and more people of faith, people for whom God is the anchor of their lives, people who once felt rooted in their communities, now feel like strangers, out of place and out of sync in the land of their birth.

One can argue that Canada and the United States have very different histories. And within the Canadian experience, Quebec is unique. For 200 years, the Church sustained a French-speaking minority in a Protestant, English-speaking culture. In doing it, the Church acquired influence over nearly every aspect of Quebec's life, to the point where Protestant street preachers were often banned from operating or even jailed. The trouble with any habit of power is that service becomes privilege. Privilege becomes entitlement. And entitlement breeds abuse and resentment. Catholic life in Quebec became formulaic long before the Quiet Revolution. When the world began to change, people shed the Church like dead skin.

American Catholics have never come close to dominance in our country. So it's tempting to feel safe from the kind of disaster that happened in Quebec. Religious belief and practice remain high in the United States compared to any other developed country. But that's changing. And the change has implications. It means that the work of *First Things* and the labor of its friends and supporters – in other words, all of you here tonight; your scholarship, your voices, your public engagement – become more vital than ever.

The mission of *First Things*, in its own words, is "to advance a religiously informed public philosophy for the ordering of society." It's another way of saying Tolkien's great line that

there's some good in the world, and it's worth fighting for. And that mission of *First Things*, which all of us in some way share, bears the best fruit when we understand that the purpose of our lives isn't politics. It's the privilege of knowing, loving and being loved by God; of serving his people and being his witnesses. That's the real story of the world. That's the narrative we belong to. Only God is God, and *God is good*. And God's goodness invites us to remember three things.

Here's the first thing. *We're a people of worship first, and action second*. That doesn't excuse retreating from the world. It's not an alibi for quietism. But for Catholics, there's no real Christian political action, no genuinely Christian social service, unless it flows out of the adoration of God. Romano Guardini said that adoration is humanity's greatest instrument of truth. It's the safeguard of our mental health and integrity.<sup>i</sup> Adoration breeds humility, and humility is the beginning of sanity. Adoration grounds our whole being in the real reality: the fact that God is God, and man is his creation.

Here's the second thing. *There are no unhappy saints*. Pope Francis says that "a Christian without joy is not a Christian." But we've really known that all along. Joy is the mark of a person who's truly found God. Chesterton wrote that joy is the "gigantic secret" of the believer. He said that "man is more himself, man is more manlike, when joy is the fundamental thing in him, and grief the superficial."<sup>ii</sup>

Here's the third and final thing. *We're in the world but not of the world*. We forget that at our peril. Henri de Lubac wrote many years ago that when the world worms its way into the life of the Church, the Church becomes not just a caricature of the world, but even worse than the world in her mediocrity and ugliness.<sup>iii</sup>

The Church has no interest in power for its own sake. Nor does she have an investment in any political system. Nor does she reject any political system so long as it respects the authentic dignity of the human person and allows communities of faith the freedom to worship God and to act, preach and serve their mission without interference in the public square. The problem we face at the moment is that, in the United States, that freedom is more and more constrained. And that brings us to the heart of our conversation this evening.

So here's the premise that grounds the rest of my comments tonight. On October 6, the Supreme Court declined to hear a variety of state appeals on the nature of marriage. In effect, the court has affirmed the validity of gay marriage, and I believe this creates a tipping point in American public discourse. The dismemberment of any privileged voice that biblical belief once had in our public square is just about complete.

This trend has been building for a long time. Gay marriage is only one of the many issues that have transformed our culture. But given the intimate and embodied nature of the relationship in every genuine marriage, and the traditional procreative implications it has for making or closing off a nation's future, gay marriage has a uniquely powerful sign value.

The most disturbing thing about the debate around gay marriage is the destruction of public reason that it accomplished. Emotion and sloganeering drove the argument. And the hatred that infected the conversation came far less from so-called "homophobes" than from many gay issue

activists themselves. People who uphold a traditional moral architecture for sexuality, marriage and family have gone in the space of just 20 years from mainstream conviction to the media equivalent of racists and bigots.

This is impressive. It's also profoundly dishonest and evil, but we need to acknowledge the professional excellence of the marketing that made it happen. We also need to thank God for the gift of this difficult moment, because conflict always does two things. It purifies the Church, and it clarifies the character of the enemies who hate her. Conflict is good when the issues matter. And very few issues matter as much to the course of a nation as the nature of marriage and family.

So what do we do now? Believers don't have the luxury of pessimism. And the idea that we can retire to the safety of some modern equivalent of a monastery in the hills, isn't practical or warranted. Our job is to be the healthy cells in a society. We need to work as long as we can, as hard as we can, to nourish the good that remains in our country – and there's a deep well of good that *does* remain -- and to encourage the seeds of a renewal that can only come from our young people.

So I want to tell you why I love this country. I love it because human beings are more than intelligent software stuck in a capsule of clay. We're creatures of place. Our bodies matter. The soil under our feet matters. Home matters. Communities matter. The sound and smell and taste of the world we know, and the beauty of it all, *matter*. There's something cheap and unworthy in a heart that has no roots; that feels no love of country.

This isn't jingoism. Chesterton said that "my country, right or wrong" makes as much sense as "my mother, drunk or sober." A good man will hate the drunkenness, but he will never stop loving his mother. That kind of love is why, despite 200 years of anti-Catholic prejudice, 80 Catholic chaplains died serving this nation in World War II, Korea and Vietnam. It's why five of them earned the Medal of Honor. Despite all of the sins and flaws of this country – and their name is legion – this is, at its best, a nation of laws; of opportunity; of real liberties and rights; and of public institutions based on the nobility of being human.

So do I believe that America is "exceptional;" something unique in history? Of course I do -- but not because it's a New Jerusalem, or a redeemer nation, or has a messianic mission. All those things are vanities and delusions. When John Winthrop wrote his famous homily for Puritan colonists nearly 400 years ago, the "city upon a hill" he imagined building in the New World was something genuinely new. It was the hope of a common life that had its foundations in humility, justice, mutual support and the love of God.

That biblical vision has always informed the American story. The idea of the "person" has *religious* origins. Even the concept of the individual – the building block of Western liberalism – has its seeds in biblical faith.<sup>iv</sup> Moderns like to locate the roots of our public life in John Locke, but they lead just as surely to John Winthrop. In practice, America has always been a mixed marriage of biblical and Enlightenment ideas. It was a fertile arrangement. It worked well for a long time. But the hard news for religious believers is that the mom and dad of the family – the two bodies of thought that gave birth to this country -- are getting a divorce. And we won't like the new rules of the house.

How did it happen? Christian Smith edited a whole book on America's secular revolution between 1870 and 1930.<sup>v</sup> It explains a lot, and it's worth reading. But for those who want the short version, there was a coup. The secular team won. The religion team lost. There was nothing accidental or inevitable about the outcome. In the words of Smith, it "was an intentional political struggle by secularizing activists to overthrow a religious establishment's control of socially legitimate knowledge." It worked. And the results have trickled down through our courts, universities, mass media and legislatures ever since.

This is bad news. It's bad because religious faith plays a key role in sustaining the American experience. In a liberal democracy, the source of political legitimacy is the will of the sovereign individual. This is expressed through elected representatives. Anything that places obligations on the individual -- except for the government itself, which embodies the will of the majority of individuals -- becomes the target of suspicion.

To protect the sovereignty of individuals, democracy separates them. It isolates them from each other. And it inevitably seeks to break down or dominate anything that stands in the way. That includes every kind of mediating institution, from community organizations, to synagogues and churches, to the family itself. This is why Tocqueville said that "despotism, which is dangerous at all times, [is] particularly to be feared in democratic centuries."<sup>vi</sup>

Tocqueville saw that the unique strength of American society, the force that kept the logic of democracy in creative check, was the prevalence and intensity of religious belief. Religion is to democracy as a bridle is to a horse. And *only* religion can moderate democracy, because it appeals to authority higher than democracy itself<sup>vii</sup>

But there's a problem, and it's this. Religion only works its influence on democracy if people really believe what it teaches. Nobody believes in God merely because it's useful -- and if people try, they make themselves liars. To put it in Catholic terms, Christianity is worthless as a leaven in society unless people actually believe in Jesus Christ, follow the Gospel, love the Church and act like real disciples with passion and purpose. If they don't, then religion is just another form of self-medicating. And that essentially sums up the way too many people in my generation have lived out their baptism.

Until the past five or six decades, American culture was deeply Protestant. That was part of the genius of the country. But it meant that Catholics -- and Jews as well -- lived through long periods of prejudice. And so they've often struggled with a sense of exclusion and inferiority. This isn't new information. But it's useful to remember nonetheless. The effect of being seen as outsiders has always fueled a Catholic passion to fit in; to find a way into the mainstream; to excel by the standards of the people who disdain us. We succeeded -- wonderfully. And in that success, we can find the seeds of the disinterest and complacency we struggle with as a Church today.

Of course, this doesn't explain the anger many Catholics feel toward their own religious leaders. That has different roots.

Blaming problems of Catholic identity on the material ambitions of ordinary Catholics has just enough truth in it to sound plausible. But it's also a convenient cheat. For the past 20 years, the clergy abuse crisis has badly eroded the confidence many Catholics have in their own bishops. And we bishops have too often *deserved* the resentment -- not only of our people, but also of our own good priests. We earned it by responding with the wrong priorities, slowly, defensively and at times even callously; trying to protect reputations and the standing of the Church at the expense of the innocent and the suffering.

These are symptoms of a leadership that's cut off, in some key ways, from the people it's meant to serve. When Pope Francis says that shepherds need to have the smell of their sheep, he could be speaking directly to the formalism, the spirit of inertia and routine, and the bureaucratic distance that's widened over the past 60 years between the pastors of the Church in the United States and their people. I'll return to these issues in a moment.

My point right now is this. These internal dynamics wrecked any chance the Church in our country had to seize a "Catholic moment" -- that sweet spot Richard Neuhaus saw in our recent history where Catholics might fill the moral hole in American culture created by the collapse of a Protestant consensus.

As a result, Tocqueville's fear about democracy without religious guidance or constraint -- what he called its power to kill souls and prepare citizens for servitude<sup>viii</sup> -- is arguably where we find ourselves today.

Lots of factors have added to the problem. Things we can't easily control. Daniel Boorstin, Neil Postman and many others have talked about the impact of new technologies on our politics. These new tools have changed the nature of our reasoning. They shape our discourse. They've moved us away from a public square ruled by logic, debate, reflection and typography, to a visual and sensory one, emotionally charged and immediate. And the influence of technology won't weaken any time soon. Here's why.

The legitimacy of *liberal democracy* depends on its ability to give its people security and freedom -- with "freedom" increasingly defined as a maximum number of choices within each person's private zone of control. The goal of *modern technology* is to subdue the natural world; to put it at the service of society in general, and individual consumers in particular. So modern democracy isn't just "allied" with modern technology; it depends on it. The two can't be separated.

Here's where the trouble comes in. As the progress of democracy and the progress of technology go hand in hand, the influence of polling, focus groups and market research grows. As a result, the state takes on a market model that requires the growth of government as a service provider. Short-term needs and wants begin to displace long-term reflection and planning. In effect, democracy becomes an expression of consumer preference. It has plenty of room for personal "values." But it has very little space for common meaning, classic virtue or shared purpose.<sup>ix</sup>

I think Ross Douthat's excellent book, *Bad Religion*, confirms this. Douthat argues that we've always been a nation of heretics. Today is no exception. Most people who leave Christianity or

Judaism don't really become atheists. They find some other spirituality or self-improvement program to fill the need for purpose. And private belief – unlike communities of faith -- fits very comfortably in a consumer democracy. Leviathan doesn't care if you see Jesus in your grilled cheese sandwich – unless you suggest that other people should see him too.

Looking back on the last 60 years, one of the Scripture passages that stays with me most vividly is Judges 2:6-15. It's the story of what happens *after* the Exodus and *after* Joshua wins the Promised Land for God's people. Verse 10 says that Joshua “and all that generation also were gathered to their fathers; and there arose another generation after them, who did not know the Lord or the work which he had done for Israel.”

It's worth reading. So is the research Christian Smith has done on the religious beliefs of American teens and young adults.<sup>x</sup> Every generation leaves a legacy of achievement and failure. In my lifetime I've had the privilege of knowing many, many good men and women of my generation – Christians, Jews and people with no religious faith at all; people who've made the world better by the gift of their lives and their joy in service to others. But the biggest failure, the biggest sadness, of so many people of my generation, including parents, educators and leaders in the Church, is our failure to pass along our faith in a compelling way to the generation now taking our place.

We can blame this on the confusion of the times. We can blame it on our own mistakes in pedagogy. But the real reason faith doesn't matter to so many of our young adults and teens is that -- too often -- *it didn't really matter to us*. Not enough to shape our lives. Not enough for us to really suffer for it.

I know there are tens of thousands of exceptions to what I've just said, starting with people in this room. But what I've said is still true. A man can't give what he doesn't have. If we want to change the culture of a nation, we need to begin by taking a hard look at the thing we call our own faith. If we don't radiate the love of God with passion and courage in the example of our daily lives, nobody else will -- least of all the young people who see us most clearly and know us most intimately. The theme tonight is “strangers in a strange land.” But the real problem in America in 2014 isn't that we believers are foreigners. It's that our children and grandchildren *aren't*. And that leads us to some final thoughts before we close.

There's a chapter in *The Brothers Karamazov* where the monastery's elder, Zosima, urges his young friends to flee from despondency and “ask gladness from the Lord. Be glad as children, as birds in the sky. And let man's sins not disturb you in your efforts.”<sup>xi</sup> That might sound like Pope Francis, but it was written by Dostoyevsky, a man who was never confused with a spring breeze. Yet for both men, both Francis and the great Russian author, the discipline of joy – the conscious choice to be grateful, to be joyful, no matter what the setback or suffering -- sustains the virtue of hope. Melancholy kills. Hope gives life. Hope keeps the human heart beating.

But of course, I've just given us a pretty hard diagnosis of our situation as believers, so *why* should we hope? We should hope because God loves us. And that's more than an empty piety. The proof of it is sitting right next to you in the friends who believe, as you do, in the goodness that still resides in American life, and who want to fight for it. In Christian belief, God's Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The world changed. Our job is to echo his Word by helping

our witness *become* flesh in the structures, moral imagination and bloodstream of the world around us. *If* that happens, the world will change again.

We defeat ourselves too easily. We have all the resources we need. The late Saul Alinsky called himself a radical, and he was clearly good at what he did. But I've always felt that his book, *Rules for Radicals*, was a kind of "Machiavelli for people with short attention spans." His rules, his pressure tactics, his deceptions, manipulations and organizing skills, are finally based on a fraud. They're not "progressive" at all. They're the same tired grasping for power that made the world what it is. The truth is, Alinsky wasn't nearly radical enough.

Radical means this:

*Blessed are the peacemakers.*

*Blessed are the merciful.*

*Blessed are the pure in heart.*

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.*

*Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven; for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

We don't need to "succeed" in living the Beatitudes. But we do need to *try* – every day, consciously, with all our hearts. If we do that, the Beatitudes irresistibly transform the world by transforming us.

I said earlier that we need to be people of worship first, action second. And it's true. But we still do have a duty to act. We can start by returning hatred with love. Martin Luther King liked to say that it's not enough to love our enemies; they need to *know* we love them. It's a hard discipline, but how we treat those who disagree with us proves -- or disproves -- what we claim to believe about God.

We need to do a much better job of building the practical, working friendships across religious and confessional lines that *First Things* already excels at. We especially need to believe God when he tells us, again and again in Scripture, to "fear not." Pressure on believers is an unintended gift to believers. The tepid leave. The strong get stronger.

For Catholics, we need to encourage the new movements and charisms in the Church much more vigorously. Groups like FOCUS, Communion and Liberation, the Christian Life Movement, the Neo-Catechumenal Way and so many others are filled with intelligent young women and men on fire for Jesus Christ and the Church. Efforts like the Augustine Institute in Denver; the Lumen Christi Institute at the University of Chicago; the Collegium Institute for Catholic Thought and Culture at the University of Pennsylvania; and an exceptional humanities program built by Thomas Smith and Kevin Hughes at Villanova University – in all of these things there's tremendous goodness that makes it impossible to grow weary.

We need to do a far better job of stewarding the Church's material resources. Philadelphia is a textbook case of too many parishes and ministries artificially kept afloat with funding long after their effective life ended. We also need to put much more emphasis on evangelizing, catechizing and educating our young people, but not necessarily with our current aerodynamic drag of structures, bureaucracy and buildings.

The same applies to the formation of our priests. We need families who form their sons in the habit of listening for a priestly vocation. And we need seminarians who have no interest in clerical privilege but a huge commitment to serving Jesus Christ. The pastoral terrain in the next 25 years will be drastically different from, and much less friendly than, anything the Church in the United States has seen in the past. We need priests prepared for that mission territory. We need parishes that are real antidotes to loneliness; real sources of mutual support, counseling, sharing and friendship – not just garrisons devoted to servicing the baptized pagan. We also need a Christian community much more receptive to Latino and other immigrants. The reason is obvious. They already comprise the invisible majority of the Church. And they embody her face of the future.

Finally we come to our duties in the public square. As I've said many times before, we have serious obligations as believers to care for the poor, the immigrant, the elderly and persons with disabilities. Those duties belong personally to you and me, not just to the government -- though government clearly has an important role. If we ignore the poor, we will go to hell. If we blind ourselves to their suffering, we will go to hell. If we do nothing to ease their burdens; *then we will go to hell*. Ignoring the needs of the poor among us is the surest way to dig a chasm of heartlessness between ourselves and God, and ourselves and our neighbors.

And lest we forget: The poor include the unborn child. The abortion struggle hasn't suddenly disappeared. There are no human rights without a fundamental right to life. Abortion is the assassination of hope. It's the murder of a society's future. There's no way to contextualize or diminish the evil of a law that allows the killing of innocent, unborn human life. Nor is there *any* way for *any* Catholic to accept or ignore that kind of legalized homicide when it comes to decisions in the voting booth or anywhere else.

As to marriage and the family: I think we'd be foolish to assume that the gay marriage debate is over, even though many believe we've lost it – at least for now. The struggle is not over. The issue now becomes how aggressive gay issue activists will be in punishing *and discriminating against* those with traditional views. Tactics can easily include denying licensure and accreditation, revoking tax exemptions, imposing liability under public accommodations statutes and employment anti-discrimination acts, closing access to government contracts and grants, and other such acts. Given the bitterness driving much of gay issue activism over the past decade or more, religious freedom will be a growing area of conflict.

A friend recently suggested that the Church should get out of the civil marriage business altogether. In a way, it makes sense. It's hard to see how a priest or bishop could, in good conscience, sign a marriage certificate that merely identifies spouse A and spouse B. This dramatizes, in a concrete way, the fact that we face some very hard choices in a new marriage regime. Refusing to conduct civil marriages now, as a matter of principled resistance, has vastly

more witness value than being kicked out of the marriage business later by the government, which is a likely bet. Or so the reasoning goes. I don't necessarily agree with this approach. But in the spirit of candor encouraged by Pope Francis, I hope our nation's bishops will see the need to discuss and consider it as a real course of action.

I've gone on longer than I usually do because this venue tonight is so important. I'm grateful for your patience. I'll end with this last thought. Augustine famously wrote that "my weight is my love."

*"The body by its own weight," he said, "gravitates toward its own place. Weight goes not downward only, but to its own place. Fire tends upward, a stone downward. They are propelled by their own weights, they seek their own places . . . My weight is my love; by it am I borne wherever I am borne. By Your gift we are inflamed, and are borne upward; we wax hot inwardly, and go forward. We ascend Your ways that be in our heart, and sing a song of degrees; we glow inwardly with [Your] good fire, and we go, because we go upward to the peace of Jerusalem."<sup>xii</sup>*

For Augustine, the fire of our love carries us upward on its heat. The more we love, the higher we rise toward heaven.

The point is this: Nations too have weight. The "weight" of a nation is the love that animates -- or fails to animate -- its treatment of the poor, the elderly, the person with disabilities, the unborn child.

Each of our lives matters. And our journey does not end in the grave. What we do has consequences for our own eternity and those around us. Our lives gathered together as communities of faith and as a nation shape the conscience and the future of the "city upon a hill" that John Winthrop imagined, and that we have inherited.

We were made by God to receive love ourselves, and *to show love to others* – love anchored in the truth about the human person and the nature of human relationships. That's our purpose. That's why we were created. We're here to bear each other's burdens; to sacrifice ourselves for the needs of others; and to live a witness of love for the God who made us – not only in our personal lives, but in all our public actions, including every one of our social, economic and political choices.

And if that makes us strangers in a strange land, then we should praise God for the privilege.

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<sup>i</sup> Romano Guardini, *The Faith and Modern Man*, Pantheon, New York, 1952, 9

<sup>ii</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, Ignatius, San Francisco, 1995, 166-167

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- iii Henri de Lubac, S.J., *Paradoxes of Faith*, Ignatius, San Francisco, 1987, 225
- iv On the origin of personhood, see Mark Shiffman, “The Loss of a Culture of Personhood and the End of Limited Government,” Front Porch Republic, October 6, 2014 ([www.frontporchrepublic.com/2014/10/loss-culture-personhood-end-limited-government/](http://www.frontporchrepublic.com/2014/10/loss-culture-personhood-end-limited-government/)). On the roots of the idea of the individual, see Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2014.
- v Christian Smith, editor, *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 2003, 1
- vi Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, J.P. Mayer, editor, George Lawrence, translator, Doubleday, New York, 1969, 509-510
- vii See Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 1996, 83-107.
- viii Tocqueville, 444
- ix See Thomas W. Smith’s excellent “Catholic Social Thought and Modern Liberal Democracy,” *Logos*, 11:1, 2008, 15-48. See also Rowan Williams’ 2002 Dibleby Lecture, *The Guardian* ([www.theguardian.com/world/2002/dec/19/religion.uk](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/dec/19/religion.uk)).
- x See Christian Smith’s *Young Catholic America: Emerging Adults In, Out of, and Gone from the Church* (2014), *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (2009), *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (2011), and *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (2009).
- xi Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Pevear/Volokhonsky translation, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1990, 320
- xii Augustine, *The Confessions*