

## SOME THOUGHTS ON CATHOLIC FAITH AND PUBLIC LIFE

Weekly Column by Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, OFM Cap.

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As we enter another election season, it's important to remember that the way we lead our public lives needs to embody what the Catholic faith teaches -- not what our personalized edition of Christianity feels comfortable with, but the real thing; the full package; what the Church actually holds to be true. In other words, *we need to be Catholics first and political creatures second.*

The more we transfer our passion for Jesus Christ to some political messiah or party platform, the more bitter we feel toward his Church when she speaks against the idols we set up in our own hearts. There's no more damning moment in all of Scripture than John 19:15: "We have no king but Caesar."

The only king Christians have is Jesus Christ. The obligation to seek and serve the truth belongs to *each of us personally*. The duty to love and help our neighbor belongs to *each of us personally*. We can't ignore or delegate away these personal duties to anyone else or any government agency. More than 1,600 years ago, St. Basil the Great warned his wealthy fellow Christians that "The bread you possess belongs to the hungry. The clothing you store in boxes belongs to the naked." St. John Chrysostom, Basil's equally great contemporary, preached exactly the same message: "God does not want golden vessels but golden hearts," and "for those who neglect their neighbor, a hell awaits with an inextinguishable fire in the company of the demons."

What was true then is true now. Hell is not a metaphor. Hell is real. Jesus spoke about it *many* times and without any ambiguity. If we do not help the poor, we'll go to hell. I'll say it again: *If we do not help the poor, we will go to hell.*

And who are the poor? They're the people we so often try to look away from -- people who are homeless or dying or unemployed or mentally disabled. They're also the unborn child who has a right to God's gift of life, and the single mother who looks to us for compassion and material support. Above all, they're the persons in need that God presents to each of us not as a "policy issue," but right here, right now, in our daily lives.

Thomas of Villanova, the great Augustinian saint for whom Villanova University is named, is remembered for his skills as a scholar and reforming bishop. But even more important was his passion for serving the poor, and his zeal for penetrating the entire world around him with the virtues of justice and Christian love.

*Time matters.* God will hold us accountable for the way we use it. All of us who call ourselves Christians share the same vocation to love God first and above all things; and to love our neighbor as ourselves. We're citizens of heaven first; but we have obligations here. *We're Catholics and Christians first.* And if we live that way -- zealously and selflessly in our public lives -- our country will be the better for it; and God will use us to help make the world new.