

## SEX, FAMILY AND THE LIBERTY OF THE CHURCH

+Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.  
2016 Tocqueville Lecture  
University of Notre Dame, 9.15.16

I want to thank Dr. Muñoz and Father Jenkins for inviting me to speak this afternoon. It's a privilege and a pleasure to be here.

A lecture named after Alexis de Tocqueville will naturally involve politics. That's a good thing, and we'll have plenty to talk about. But I don't want to begin there today.

I spent much of last week helping my brother and his wife with the funeral of their daughter Allison, my niece. Allison was 32. She was intelligent, beautiful and set to be married on October 1. In May she was diagnosed with cancer. Last week she discovered that her medical treatments had failed. She died a few days later. I mention this not to cast a shadow on our discussion today – in fact, quite the opposite. Allison had a great life. She loved well, had a lot of joy and was very well loved. And that love will continue to live in the people who knew her.

I mention Allison because the farthest thing from anyone's mind as she and we measured her life last week was politics.

Leon Bloy, the great French Catholic convert, once said that -- in the end -- the only thing that matters is to be a saint. That's the ultimate task of a place like Notre Dame. It's not to help you get into a great law school, or to go to a great medical school, or to find a great job on Wall Street, as good as those things clearly are. It's to help you get into *heaven* – which is not some imaginary fairyland, but an eternity of life in the presence of a loving God. If you don't believe that, you're in the wrong place.

Life is a gift, not an accident. And the point of a life is to become the kind of fully human person who knows and loves God above *everything else*, and reflects that love to others. That's the only compelling reason for a university that calls itself Catholic to exist. And it's a privilege for Notre Dame to be part of that vocation.

My comments this afternoon are simple. They come in three parts. I want to speak first about the impending election. Then we'll move to the theme of today's talk: sex, family and the liberty of the Church. Then we'll touch on a few things we might want to remember going forward as Catholic Christians.

I come from a place where the state attorney general was just convicted of nine felonies. The FBI is investigating Philadelphia's district attorney. Philadelphia's second district U.S. Congressman, Chaka Fattah, was forced to resign and then convicted of racketeering and

influence-peddling. And several members of the state assembly from the Philadelphia area, as well as three state Supreme Court justices, were caught in various scandals.

This has all happened just in the five years I've been archbishop of Philadelphia. Pennsylvania has its own Wikipedia category – “Pennsylvania Politicians Convicted of Crimes” – with 58 separate entries. But the really curious thing about listing these bad actors is this. They're familiar. They're almost reassuring in the modesty of their appetites and lack of imagination. Selling your state assembly vote for the price of a necklace is wrong. But it's hardly a new kind of bad behavior. And it doesn't shake the foundations of the republic.

Regrettably, other things *do*.

I turn 72 later this month. I've been voting since 1966. That's exactly 50 years. And in that half-century, the major parties have never, at the same time, offered two such deeply flawed presidential candidates. The 1972 Nixon/McGovern race comes close. But 2016 wins the crown.

Only God knows the human heart, so I presume that both major candidates for the White House this year intend well and have a reasonable level of personal decency behind their public images. But I also believe that each candidate is very bad news for our country, though in different ways. One candidate, in the view of a lot of people, is a belligerent demagogue with an impulse control problem. And the other, also in the view of a lot of people, is a criminal liar, uniquely rich in stale ideas and bad priorities.

So where does that leave us? The historian Henry Adams once described the practice of politics as “the systematic organization of hatreds.” And there's plenty in our current political season that invites cynicism. But Christians don't have that option. We not allowed the luxury of cynicism for at least five reasons.

*First*, too many honest public officials already exist who do serve our country well.

*Second*, even in a year of bad presidential choices, good candidates for other public offices exist in both major parties.

*Third*, if Christians leave the public square, other people with much worse intentions *won't*. The surest way to make the country suffer is to *not contest them in public debate and in the voting booth*.

*Fourth*, the essence of a Christian life, as Pope Francis reminds us, is hope and joy, not despair. The choices we make and the actions we take do make a difference. Like Benedict and John Paul II before him, Francis sees politics, rightly lived, as a vehicle for justice, charity and mercy. The political vocation matters because, done well, it can ennoble the society it serves.

*Fifth and finally*, Christians are not *of* the world, but we're most definitely *in* it. Augustine would say that our home is the City of God, but we get there by passing through the City of Man.

While we're on the road, we have a duty to leave the world better than we found it. One of the ways we do that, however imperfectly, is through politics.

In other words, elections *do* matter. They matter a lot. The next president will appoint several Supreme Court justices, make vital foreign policy decisions, and shape the huge federal administrative machinery in ways over which Congress has little control. It's good to remember that Congress didn't create the politically vindictive HHS mandate. The Obama White House did that.

But here's my larger point: We've reached a moment when our political thinking and vocabulary as a nation seem exhausted. The real effect that we as individuals have on the government and political class that claim to represent us – the big mechanical Golem we call Washington -- is so slight that it breeds indifference and anger.

As Christians, then, our political engagement needs to involve more than just wringing our hands and whining about the ugly choice we face in November. It needs to be more than a search for better candidates and policies, or shrewder slogans. The task of renewing a society is much more long term than a trip every few years to the voting booth. And it requires *a different kind of people*. It demands that *we* be different people.

Augustine said that complaining about the times makes no sense because *we are* the times. And that means, in turn, that changing the country means first changing ourselves.

So, what does any of this have to do with sex, family and the liberty of the Church? I'll answer the question this way.

I've been a priest for 46 years. During that time I've heard something more than 12,000 personal confessions and done hundreds of spiritual direction sessions. That's a lot of listening. When you spend several thousand hours of your life, as most priests do, hearing the failures and hurts in people's lives – men who beat their wives; women who cheat on their husbands; the addicts to porn or alcohol or drugs; the thieves, the hopeless, the self-satisfied and the self-hating – you get a pretty good picture of the world as it really is, and its effect on the human soul. The confessional is more real than any reality show because nobody's watching. It's just you, God and the penitents, and the suffering they bring with them.

As a priest, what's most striking to me about the last five decades is the huge spike in people – both men and women -- confessing promiscuity, infidelity, sexual violence and sexual confusion as an ordinary part of life, and the massive role of pornography in wrecking marriages, families and even the vocations of clergy and religious.

In a sense, this shouldn't surprise. Sex is powerful. Sex is attractive. Sex is a basic appetite and instinct. Our sexuality is tied intimately to who we are; how we search for love and happiness; how we defeat the pervasive loneliness in life; and, for most people, how we claim some little bit of permanence in the world and its story by having children. The reason Pope Francis so forcefully rejects "gender theory" is *not* just because it lacks scientific support -- though it certainly has that problem. Gender theory is a kind of metaphysics that subverts the very nature

of sexuality by denying the male-female complementarity encoded into our bodies. In doing that, it attacks a basic building block of human identity and meaning -- and by extension, the foundation of human social organization.

But let's get back to the confessional. Listening to people's sexual sins in the Sacrament of Penance is hardly new news. But the scope, the novelty, the violence and the compulsiveness of the sins *are*. And remember that people only come to Confession when they *already* have some sense of right and wrong; when they *already* understand, at least dimly, that they need to change their lives and seek God's mercy.

That word "mercy" is worth examining. Mercy is one of the defining and most beautiful qualities of God. Pope Francis rightly calls us to incarnate it in our own lives this year. Unfortunately, it's also a word we can easily misuse to avoid the hard work of moral reasoning and judgment. Mercy means nothing – it's just an exercise in sentimentality – without clarity about moral truth.

We can't show mercy to someone who owes us nothing; someone who's done nothing wrong. Mercy implies a pre-existing act of *injustice* that must be corrected. And satisfying justice requires a framework of higher truth about human meaning and behavior. It requires an understanding of truth that establishes some things as good and others as evil; some things as life-giving and others that are destructive.

Here's why that's important. The *truth* about our sexuality is that infidelity, promiscuity, sexual confusion and mass pornography create human wreckage. Multiply that wreckage by tens of millions of persons over five decades. Then compound it with media nonsense about the innocence of casual sex and the "happy" children of friendly divorces. What you get is what we have now: a dysfunctional culture of frustrated and wounded people increasingly incapable of permanent commitments, self-sacrifice and sustained intimacy, and unwilling to face the reality of their own problems.

This has *political* consequences. People unwilling to rule their appetites will inevitably be *ruled by* them -- and eventually, they'll be ruled by someone else. People too weak to sustain faithful relationships are also too weak to be free. Sooner or later they surrender themselves to a state that compensates for their narcissism and immaturity with its own forms of social control.

People too worried or self-focused to welcome new life, to bear and raise children in a loving family, and to form them in virtue and moral character, are writing themselves out of the human story. They're extinguishing their own future. This is what makes the resistance of so many millennials to having children so troubling.<sup>1</sup>

The future belongs to people who believe in something beyond themselves, and who live and sacrifice accordingly. It belongs to people who think and hope *inter-generationally*. If you want a portrait of what I mean, consider this: The most common name given to newborn male babies in London for the past four years in a row is Muhammad. This, in the city of Thomas More.

Weak and selfish individuals make weak and selfish marriages. Weak and selfish marriages make broken families. And broken families continue and spread the cycle of dysfunction. They do it by creating more and more wounded individuals. A vast amount of social data shows that children from broken families are *much* more likely to live in poverty, to be poorly educated, and to have more emotional and physical health issues than children from intact families. In other words, when healthy marriages and families decline, the social costs rise.

The family is where children discover how to be human. It's where they learn how to respect and love other people; where they see their parents sacrificing for the common good of the household; and where they discover their place in a family story larger than themselves. Raising children is beautiful but also hard work. It's a task for unselfish, devoted *parents*. And parents need the friendship and support of other likeminded parents. It takes *parents* to raise a child, not a legion of professional experts, as helpful as they can sometimes be.

Only a mother and father can provide the intimacy of maternal and paternal love. Many single parents do a heroic job of raising good children, and they deserve our admiration and praise. But only a mother and father can offer the unique kind of human love rooted in flesh and blood; the kind that comes from mutual submission and self-giving; the kind that comes from the complementarity of sexual difference.

No parents do this perfectly. Some fail badly. Too often the nature of modern American life *helps and encourages* them to fail. But in trying, parents pass along to the next generation an absolutely basic truth. It's the truth that things like love, faith, trust, patience, understanding, tenderness, fidelity and courage really do matter, and they provide the foundation for a fully human life.

Of course some of the worst pressures on family life come from outside the home. They come in the form of unemployment, low pay, crime, poor housing, chronic illness and bad schools.

These are vitally important issues with real human consequences. And in Catholic thought, government has a role to play in easing such problems – but *not* if a government works from a crippled idea of who man is, what marriage is, and what a family is. And *not* if a government deliberately shapes its policies to interfere with and control the mediating institutions in civil society that already serve the public well. Yet this could arguably describe many of the current administration's actions over the past seven years.

The counterweight to intrusive government is a populace of mature citizens who push back and defend the autonomy of their civil space. The problem with a consumer economy though – as Christopher Lasch saw nearly 40 years ago -- is that it *creates and relies on* dependent, self-absorbed consumers. It needs and breeds what Lasch called a “culture of narcissism,” forgetful of the past, addicted to the present and disinterested in the future. And it's hard to argue with the evidence. In his inaugural speech of 1961, John F. Kennedy could still tell Americans, quite confidently, to “ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” Today I wonder how many of us might find his words not only naïve and annoying, but an inversion of priorities.

If we want strong families, we need strong men and women to create and sustain them with maturity and love. And as a family of families, the Church is no different. The Church is strong when her families and individual sons and daughters are strong; when they believe what she teaches, and then witness her message with courage and zeal.

She's weak when her people are too tepid or comfortable, too eager to "fit in" or frankly too afraid of public disapproval, to see the world as it really is. The Church is "ours" only in the sense that we belong to her as our mother and teacher in the family of God. The Church does not belong to us. We belong to her. And the Church in turn belongs to Jesus Christ who guarantees her freedom whether Caesar likes it or not.

The Church is free even in the worst persecution. She's free even when many of her children desert her. She's free because God *does* exist, and the Church depends not on numbers or resources but on her fidelity to God's Word. But her practical liberty -- her credibility and effectiveness, here and now, in our wider society -- depends on us. So we should turn to that issue in the time remaining.

In his classic work *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville noted that the success of American democracy depended, in large part, on the strong American attachment to family and religious faith.<sup>2</sup>

In effect, families and churches stand between the individual and the state. They protect the autonomy of the individual by hemming in the power of government, resisting its tendency to claim the entirety of life. But they also pull us out of ourselves and teach us to engage generously with others.

As families and religious faith break down, the power of the state grows. Government fills in the spaces left behind by mediating institutions. The individual is freed from his traditional obligations. But he inherits a harder master in the state. Left to itself, as Tocqueville saw, democracy tends toward a kind of soft totalitarianism in which even a person's most intimate concerns, from his sexual relations to his religious convictions, are swallowed by the political process.

We now live in a country where marriage, family and traditional religion all seem to be failing. And – inevitably -- support for democracy itself has dropped. Fewer than 30 percent of U.S. millennials think that it's vital to live in a nation ruled democratically. Nearly a quarter of those born in the 1980s or later see democracy as a bad way to run a country. And nearly half of Americans surveyed feel that experts, not government, should "make decisions according to what they think is best for the country." Undemocratic feelings have risen especially among the wealthy.<sup>3</sup>

This didn't happen overnight. And it didn't happen by accident. We behaved ourselves into this mess by living a collection of lies. And the essence of those lies is summed up in the so-called "mystery clause" of the 1992 *Planned Parenthood vs. Casey* Supreme Court decision upholding the *Roe vs. Wade* abortion decision.

Writing for the majority in *Casey*, Justice Anthony Kennedy claimed that “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” This is the perfect manifesto of a liberal democratic fantasy: the sovereign, self-creating self. But it’s a lie. It’s the very *opposite* of real Christian freedom. And to the degree we excuse or cooperate with it, we make ourselves liars.

The Gospel of John reminds us that the truth, and only the truth, makes us free. We’re fully human and free *only* when we live under the authority of the truth. And in that light, no issue has made us more dishonest and less free as believers and as a nation than abortion. People uncomfortable with the abortion issue argue, quite properly, that Catholic teaching is bigger than just one issue. Other urgent issues also need our attention. Being pro-birth is not the same as being pro-life. And being truly “prolife” doesn’t end with defending the unborn child.

But it does and it must *begin* there. To borrow some words from one of Notre Dame’s distinguished alumni: Abortion has been “the beachhead for an entire ethic that is hostile to life, hostile to marriage and, as we see from the [HHS] contraceptive mandate, increasingly hostile to religion, religious Americans and religious institutions.”<sup>4</sup> Abortion poisons everything. There can never be anything “progressive” in killing an unborn child, or standing aside tolerantly while others do it.

In every abortion, an innocent life always dies. This is why no equivalence can ever exist between the intentional killing involved in abortion, infanticide and euthanasia on the one hand, and issues like homelessness, the death penalty and anti-poverty policy on the other. Again, all of these issues are important. But trying to reason or imply them into having the same moral weight is a debasement of Christian thought.

This is why so many Catholics – beginning, to his credit, with Bishop Rhoades -- were so deeply troubled when Vice President Biden received the university’s Laetare Medal earlier this year.

For the nation’s leading Catholic university to honor a Catholic public official who supports abortion rights and then goes on to conduct a same-sex civil marriage ceremony just weeks later, is – to put it kindly – a contradiction of Notre Dame’s identity. It’s a baffling error of judgment. What matters isn’t the vice president’s personal decency or the university’s admirable intentions. The problem, and it’s a serious problem, is one of *public witness* and the damage it causes both to the faithful and to the uninformed.

I mention this less to criticize than to encourage. Unlike so many other institutions that describe themselves as “Catholic,” Notre Dame *really is* still deeply Catholic not just in its marketing, but in its soul. Brad Gregory, Mary Keys, John Cavadini, Gerard Bradley, Patrick Deneen, Ann Astell, Father Bill Miscamble, Carter Snead, Nicole Garnett, Richard Garnett, Christian Smith, Francesca Murphy, Dan Philpott, Dr. Muñoz and so many others – all of these exceptional scholars teach here. And they privilege the Catholic community with their fidelity, their intellects and their service.

Of course from those who receive much, a lot is expected. It’s quite stunning to walk this campus and see the beauty of the buildings, the scope of the stadium, the energy of the students

and the constant pace of growth. But I hope Notre Dame never stops examining the fundamental *why* of its mission. What kind of success is really success? It seems to me that we already have a Princeton, a Stanford and a Yale. We don't need a Catholic version of any them.

What the Church needs now is a university that radiates the glory of God in age that no longer knows what it means to be human. What the people of God need now is a university that fuses the joy of Francis with the brilliance of Benedict and the courage, fidelity and humanity of the great John Paul.

I said at the start of my remarks that the task of renewing the life of our nation requires *a different kind of people*. It demands that *we* be different people. The power of the powerless, Václav Havel once wrote, consists not in clever political strategies but in the simple daily discipline of living within the truth and refusing to lie. Surely there's no better way to begin that work than here and now. And creating the "different kind of people" we need is -- and should be -- the mission of this university.

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<sup>1</sup> Ironically, millennials are less sexually active than Baby Boomers and Gen X individuals were at the same age and are either delaying child-bearing or avoiding it altogether. See, among other stories, Catherine Rampell, "Bad news for older folks: Millennials are having fewer babies," the *Washington Post*, May 4, 2015; Claritza Jimenez, "The sex lives of millennials," the *Washington Post*, June 30, 2016; R. R. Reno, "While we're at it," *First Things*, October 2016; Isabelle Kohn, "9 brutally real reasons why millennials refuse to have kids," *The Rooster*, September 1, 2016; etc.

<sup>2</sup> See "Democracy and Religion" in Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, MD, 1996, p. 83-107

<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Burgess, "When it's democracy itself they disavow," American Enterprise Institute, August 22, 2016; data drawn from Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mouk, writing in the *Journal of Democracy*

<sup>4</sup> Rachel O'Grady, *The Observer*, August 30, 2016, interview with William McGurn of the *Wall Street Journal*