

By abp. Charles J. Chaput

My theme focuses on Catholics and the American future. But sometimes the best way to look at the future is through the lens of the past.

One of the most sacred symbols of the Roman state was an altar to the goddess Victory. It stood in the Roman Senate for nearly 400 years. In a.d. 382, a Christian emperor removed the altar as idolatrous. Two years later, after his death, the pagan prefect of Rome—Quintus Aurelius Symmachus—wrote one of the most interesting letters of Late Antiquity. Addressing the new Christian emperor, Symmachus asked that the Altar of Victory be restored.

In effect, in arguing for the altar, he argued the case for an entire way of life. He described the altar's removal as unwise and unjust. He praised past emperors for their tolerance in maintaining the old religion and funding pagan ceremonies. He said that Rome's pagan worship had protected the city and subdued the world, and therefore deserved to be treated with the reverence due to posterity.

He stressed that the altar ensured a sacred guarantee for Rome's civil authority. And in a strikingly modern passage he said:

"We ask then for peace for the gods of our fathers and of our country. It is just that all worship should be considered as one. We look on the same stars; the sky is common; the same world surrounds us. What difference does it make by what pains each seeks the truth? We cannot attain so great a secret by one road . . . [so therefore] we offer now prayers, not conflict."

It's impossible to read Symmachus today without feeling a kind of compassion for his cause. But his words did no good. Christians already outnumbered pagans in Rome itself. St. Ambrose of Milan, one of the great Latin Fathers of the Church, wrote a crushing response to Symmachus that ended the discussion. The Altar of Victory never returned to the Senate. Paganism slowly died away.

Symmachus argued well. But he argued from weakness—the weakness of nostalgia for old ways that were already dying; the weakness of religious rites that no longer had any power; the weakness of pleading to be heard rather than demanding and winning a place in the human heart through the zeal of religious action and the force of religious witness.

Nobody listened to Symmachus because nobody cares about embers. But everyone pays attention to a fire—especially when it burns in the hearts of other men and women. And that brings us back to the point of our discussion tonight.

Jesus said, “I came to cast fire upon the earth, and would that it were already kindled!” (Lk 12:49). For much of our nation’s history, those words were known to most Americans and actually meant something in the way people organized their lives. The United States was never a Christian nation. But it didn’t need to be. Its public life and civic institutions were deeply informed by biblical thought, language and morality. More importantly, most Americans were Christians; most took their faith seriously; and many tried to live it, to a degree that astonished Alexis de Tocqueville in his account of their Sunday worship.

But that was then. This is now. And it leads us to the lesson in the story of Symmachus: Christians once felt peculiarly at home in America, a land first settled by Christians and predominantly built by them over the course of three centuries. But in recent years, God, like the Altar of Victory, has been less and less welcome at the center of our common life. As a result, Christians may soon find themselves in the same place Symmachus once did—arguing from the margins.

The America emerging in the next several decades is likely to be much less friendly to Christian faith than anything in our country’s past. And that poses a challenge for all of us as Catholics. It’s not a question of when or if it might happen. It’s happening today.

Now those are strong words. They can easily sound implausible because the roots of the American experience are so deeply Protestant. What people believe—or don’t believe—about God, helps to shape what they believe about men and women. And what they believe about men and women creates the framework for a nation’s public life. Traditionally, a broad Christian faith has provided the basis for Americans’ moral consensus. That moral consensus has informed American social policy and law.

It’s true that God was left out of the U.S. Constitution—but not because he was unwelcome. In effect, God suffused the whole constitutional enterprise. Nearly all the Founders were religious believers, most were Christians, and some were quite devout. Their work was heavily influenced not just by the Enlightenment, but also by the legacy of Jewish and Christian Scripture. This is why the religion-friendly nature of the American founding was so obvious to the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It was equally clear to the French philosopher, Jacques Maritain, who drew on the American experience when co-drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In practice, John Adams and his founding colleagues were men who, as Daniel Boorstin once suggested, had minds that were a “miscellany and a museum;” men who could blend the old

and the new, Christian faith and Enlightenment ideas, without destroying either. The Founders saw religious faith as something separate from government but vital to the nation's survival. In his Farewell Address, Washington stressed that "religion and morality are indispensable supports" for political prosperity. He added that "reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle." For John Jay, James Wilson, Alexander Hamilton, Charles Carroll, John Adams, George Washington and most of the other Founders—*including* Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin—religion created virtuous citizens. And only virtuous citizens could sustain a country as carefully balanced in its institutions, moral instincts and laws as the United States.

The American experiment—a nonsectarian, democratic society, sustained by a strong, implicitly Christian worldview and moral vocabulary—worked well for nearly 200 years. Despite its Protestant pedigree and the prejudice that went along with it, America had the flexibility to make room for Catholics; and Catholics could and did thrive here. In fact, next to America's broad collection of evangelical churches, baptized Catholics now make up the biggest religious community in the United States. They serve in large numbers in Congress. They have a majority on the Supreme Court. They play commanding roles in the professions and in business leadership.

All of this sounds impressive. The problem is, today it has less and less meaning. Roughly 80 percent of Americans still self-identify as Christians. By European standards, American religious practice remains high. But America's religious terrain is steadily changing. A quarter of Americans aged 18-29 now have no affiliation with any particular religion. According to Barna Group and other research studies, they also show "a greater degree of criticism toward Christianity than did previous generations when they were at the same stage of life. In fact, in just a decade . . . the Christian image [has] shifted substantially downward, fueled in part by a growing sense of disengagement and disillusionment among young people."

These young persons will begin inheriting national leadership in the next decade. Yet, as Christian Smith and his colleagues (*Lost in Transition*) have shown, many of these emerging adults are unable to engage in a discussion about real moral dilemmas; many lack any knowledge of religious principles to apply in making tough moral decisions; and most have had a deeply inadequate moral formation. Catholic losses have been masked by Latino immigration. But while 31 percent of Americans say they were raised in the Catholic faith, fewer than 24 percent of Americans now describe themselves as Catholic. This disappearance of a Christian critical mass in American life has already had results. To name the most obvious example: Sexual minorities now routinely use the state's power and friendly mass media to break down traditional definitions of marriage and the family. And they often encounter tepid or disorganized resistance, reported by the media in lopsidedly negative ways.

In the years ahead, we're going to see more and more of this trend, along with attempts by civil authority to interfere in the life of believing communities in the name of individual rights. We'll also see less and less unchallenged space for religious institutions to carry out their work in the public square. It's already happening with state pressure on Catholic hospitals and adoption agencies, in lawsuits attacking the scope of religious liberty, federal restrictions on conscience protections, attacks on charitable tax deductions and religious tax-exempt status, and

interference in the hiring practices of organizations like Catholic Charities. It's no accident that America's bishops established a special committee on religious liberty earlier this year. Freedom of belief and religious practice used to be a concern that Americans had about *other* countries. Now it's a concern in ours.

The question is: How did we get from the America of Tocqueville, where on Sundays "the commercial and industrial life of the nation seems suspended [in piety, and] all noise ceases," to the America where—borrowing the words of Pascal Bruckner—we're the "galley slaves of pleasure;" an America of obsessive consumption and confused sexuality where "the intention was to produce freedom, but the result was advertising; [where] what was liberated was less our libido than our appetite for unlimited shopping"?

By the way, Bruckner is not some overheated Bible-Belt preacher. He's a thoroughly secular French skeptic who writes what he sees.

I think the truth is that America's problems grew up along with its virtues. In a sense, they come from the same seed. Reformation theology and Enlightenment thought elevate the importance of the individual. But they can also feed a destructive individualism and a hostility to any religious authority outside the sovereignty of personal conscience.

And here's the result: Without the restraints of a common moral consensus animated and defended by a living religious community, the freedom of the individual easily becomes a license for selfishness. The meaning of right and wrong becomes privatized. And ultimately, society ends up as a collection of disconnected individuals whose appetites and needs are regulated by the only project they share in common: the state.

Tocqueville saw public opinion as a great vulnerability for democracy. In a democracy—at least in theory—every man is his own final moral authority. But the reality is different. Men and women very soon discover how isolated and uninformed they are as individuals. In the absence of a strong religious or similar community, they tend to abdicate their thinking to public opinion, the closest that purely secular democracies ever come to a consensus. To the degree that public opinion can be manipulated, democratic life is subverted.

This is why the Founders saw religion as so important to the health of the public square: At its best, faith creates a stable moral framework for political discourse and morally educated citizens to conduct the nation's work. The trouble is, no religion can survive on its utility. People don't conform their lives to a message because it's useful. They do it because they believe the message is *true* and therefore life-giving. Or they don't do it.

My point is this: The "next America" we now see emerging—an America ignorant or cynical toward religion in general and Christianity in particular—shouldn't really surprise anyone. It's a new America, but it's *made* in America. We can blame the mass media, or the academy, or science, or special interest groups for the environment we now face. But we Christians—including we Catholics—helped create it with our eagerness to fit in, our distractions and overconfidence, and our own lukewarm faith.

Too many people who claim to be Christian simply don't know Jesus Christ**.** They don't really believe in the Gospels. They feel embarrassed by their religion and vaguely out of step with the times. They may keep their religion for comfort value. Or they may adjust it to fit their doubts. But it doesn't reshape their lives because it isn't real. And because it isn't real, it has no transforming effect on their personal behavior, no social force and few public consequences. That sort of faith is exactly the same kind of religion that Symmachus once mourned. Whatever it once was—now, it's dead.

So having said all this, what can believers, and especially Catholic believers, do about it? In his lifetime, the Jesuit scholar John Courtney Murray would have argued that Catholics can provide to America the moral force and intellectual depth that mainline Protestantism has lost. I believe he was right. I greatly admire his work. Murray was never blind to the flaws of our political system or the split personality of its founding. But I believe his hope in the *possibilities* of the American experiment was justified.

We make the future, not the other way around. Nothing in this world is inevitable except the victory of Jesus Christ; and that includes what history finally says about the character of the nation we call America. During my years as a bishop I've met thousands—and I mean many *many* thousands—of young adults on fire for Jesus Christ and deeply committed to their Catholic faith. And I've seen them come together in movements and projects that give their hunger for God real force: things like the Fellowship of Catholic University Students, Communion and Liberation, the Neo-Catechumenal Way, the Christian Life Movement, and efforts like the wonderful new lay graduate school in Denver, the Augustine Institute.

I could name many other examples, but you get the idea. These Catholic young people aren't alone. You can find them in every corner of the country. But they need the kind of leadership and the kind of education that radiates confidence in the Word of God; fidelity to the Catholic faith; and a missionary zeal to make all things new in Jesus Christ—including the public square.

I do think Father Murray misread how eager Catholics were to fit into the American mainstream and how painfully they felt their own social inferiority. And he didn't live to see where these problems would lead. Instead of Catholics converting the culture, the culture too often bleached out the apostolic zeal in Catholics while leaving the brand label intact. Plenty of exceptions exist to that trend, but so far not enough of them to make a difference. This is why the large number of Catholics in political and economic leadership in our country has such limited effect on the country's direction. And the lack of a vigorous Catholic witness goes beyond politics and the economy. It applies in a uniquely hurtful way to Catholic higher education.

It's impossible to reread the 1967 Land O' Lakes Statement on the nature of the contemporary Catholic university without noticing that the word "faith" appears nowhere in the text. In effect, the statement is a declaration of independence from any authority outside the academic community itself. This might make some sense for a secular institution. But it's odd for any scholarly community committed to serving both faith and reason; and it creates real problems of honesty for any school wishing to cast itself as part of a living Catholic tradition.

The easing away of Catholic universities and colleges from their Catholic identity can have various causes. One cause is the decline in religious personnel available to staff faculties. Another is economic survival. But another cause is the discomfort too many Catholics feel with a scholarly tradition that can be made to seem shabby and primitive in an age of scientific doubt. This is the worst sort of falsehood—the kind that steals a treasury of wisdom, imagination and hope from emerging Catholic leaders.

The genius of Catholic higher education is the schooling it gives in the mutual dependency of faith and reason. At its best, it refuses to separate intellectual and moral formation because they are inextricably linked. It gives primacy to the disciplines that guide the formation of a holistic view of reality—philosophy and theology. It aids in the creation of a Christian culture and explains what this means for human thriving. It offers a coherent anthropology that treats the human being as a whole, and actually gives meaning to the words "human dignity" instead of turning them into a catch-phrase for the latest version of individualism. It offers an immersion in the virtues, and an appreciation of humanity's material and spiritual realities—the visible and invisible world—all of which get their life from belief in Jesus Christ.

To put it another way, Catholic higher education is heir to the greatest intellectual, moral and cultural patrimony in human history. It has a deeply satisfying answer to who and why man is. It's beautiful because it's true. It has *nothing* to be embarrassed about and *every reason* to be on fire with confidence and apostolic zeal. We only defeat ourselves—and we certainly don't serve God—if we allow ourselves to ever think otherwise.

One of the reasons I'm grateful to be here tonight is that I share with the community that founded Assumption College a very deep love of St. Augustine . For bishops, Augustine is the model of what it means to be a pastor. But he's important for another reason as well. Augustine embodies the Catholic ideal of personal holiness lived in a community of virtue; and the integration of faith and reason at the very highest level. He reveres the past as a tool for teaching us, and also as a tradition on which we depend. But he combines this with an awareness of the passing nature of this world and the culmination of the human story outside of time. Augustine is a man between two worlds, which is exactly the condition we all share.

Augustine reminds us that the City of Man and the City of God intermingle. We have obligations to each. But our final home and our real citizenship are not in this world. Politics is important, but it's never the main focus or purpose of a Christian life. If we do not know and love Jesus Christ, and commit our lives to him, and act on what we claim to believe, everything else is empty. But if we do, so much else is possible—including the conversion of at least some of the world around us. The only question that finally matters to any of us is the one Jesus posed to his apostles: *"Who do you say I am?"* Everything depends on the answer. Faith leads in one direction; the lack of it in another. But the issue is faith—always and everywhere, whether we're scholars or doctors or priests or lawyers or mechanics. Do we believe in Jesus Christ, or don't we? And if we do, what are we going to do about it?

The vocation of a Catholic college is to feed the soul as well as the mind; to offer a vision of men and women made whole by the love of God, the knowledge of creation and the reality of things unseen; to see the beauty of the world in the light of eternity; to recapture the nobility of

the human story and the dignity of the human person.

This is the work that sets fire to a young person's heart. It starts the only kind of revolution that really changes anything: a revolution of love. Jesus said, *I came to cast fire upon the earth, and would that it were already kindled.*

Our task is to start that blaze and then help it grow.

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