

RELIGION AND THE COMMON GOOD

Most Reverend Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.

Sooner or later, every teacher hears the same old joke about the philosophy student and his dad. The dad asks, "Son, what are you going to do with that goofy degree?" And the son says, "I'm going to open a philosophy shop and make big money selling ideas." I smile every time I hear it, because nobody yet has figured out how to get rich off the Sartre or Kierkegaard or Friedrich Nietzsche franchise. Or that's what I thought until a couple of weeks ago, when a friend of mine came back from a local bookstore with a bag full of Nietzsche's Will to Power Bars.

You'll remember that Nietzsche first claimed that God was dead. Then he went insane. Then he argued that he was God himself. Now he has his own candy bar. In fact, the wrapper not only claims to be filled with chocolaty goodness, but also to be the official nutritional supplement of the superman. Unfortunately, the wrapper also urges us to think beyond good and evil, so I'm not sure it's telling the truth.

The company that makes these candy bars is the Unemployed Philosophers Guild. It was started by a couple of academics who couldn't get a job. The Guild also makes a Franz Kafka finger puppet and a Here's Looking at Euclid tee shirt. It also makes the Karl Marx Little Thinker beanie doll, and *Impeachmints*, the anti-George Bush breath sweetener. In the words of the company founders, "It turned out that making smart, funny things proved to be almost as satisfying as probing eternal questions ... [And] although we still contemplate truth and justice, it is our enduring goal to fulfill the materialistic desires of the funny and sophisticated everywhere."

I don't know if Nietzsche himself would endorse these bars. Given his mental state at the end of his life, I'm not sure he'd care. But he did have a ruthless sense of humor. Nietzsche might enjoy the fact that he's exactly the kind of thinker young college men now quote to impress young college women. He has some of the same rebel appeal that Milton gave to Lucifer and Goethe gave to Mephistopheles. He's bold. He's radical. And the fact that he also went mad adds just the right touch of drama. In other words, he makes a great cultural icon for Americans to eat as a candy bar, because most Americans will never read a word of what he actually said.

The trouble is, once upon a time, some people in Germany did read him. And they did take him seriously. And they acted on what he said. Ideas have consequences. When Nietzsche asks us on the back of a Will to Power candy bar, "Is man merely a mistake of God's, or God merely a mistake of man?," we Americans can swallow our chocolate along with our Starbuck's and grin at the irony from the comfort of 2007. Sixty years ago, no one would have gotten the joke. There was nothing funny about the Holocaust. Ideas have consequences.

That brings us to our topic. When Cardinal Rigali first invited me to talk about religion and the common good some months ago, I accepted for two simple reasons. First, I'm tired of the Church and her people being told to be quiet on issues that urgently concern us. And

second, I'm tired of Catholics themselves being silent out of some misguided sense of good manners. Self-censorship is an even bigger sin than allowing ourselves to be bullied by outsiders.

Only one question really matters. Does God exist or not? If He does, that has implications for every aspect of our personal and public behavior: all of our actions, all of our choices, all of our decisions. If God exists, denying Him in our public life, whether we do it explicitly like Nietzsche or implicitly by our silence, cannot serve the common good because it amounts to worshiping the unreal in the place of the real.

Religious believers built this country. Christians played a leading role in that work. This is a fact, not an opinion. Our entire framework of human rights is based on a religious understanding of the dignity of the human person as a child of his or her Creator. Nietzsche once said that, "convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies." But that's false. Not even he believed that, or he couldn't have written a single book.

In fact, the opposite is often true. Convictions can be the seeds of truth incarnated in a person's individual will. The right kind of convictions guide us forward. They give us meaning. *Not* acting on our convictions is cowardice. As Catholics we need to live our convictions in the public square with charity and respect for others, but also firmly, with courage and without apology. Anything less is a form of theft from the moral witness we owe to the public discussion of issues. We can never serve the common good by betraying who we are as believers or compromising away what we hold to be true.

Unfortunately, I think the current American debate over religion and the public square has much deeper roots than the 2006 or 2004 elections, or even John Kennedy or the Second Vatican Council. A crisis of faith and action for Christians has been growing for many years in Western society. It's taken longer to have an impact here in the United States because we're younger as a nation than the countries in Europe, and we've escaped some of Europe's wars and worst social and religious struggles.

But Americans now face the same growing spiritual illness that Tolkien, Chesterton, Christopher Dawson, Romano Guardini and C.S. Lewis all wrote about in the last century. It's a loss of hope and purpose that comes from the loss of an interior life and a living faith. It's a loss that we can only make bearable by creating a culture of material comfort that feeds – and feeds off of – personal selfishness. And no one understood this better than Georges Bernanos.

Most of us remember Bernanos for his novels, especially *The Diary of a Country Priest* and *Under Satan's Sun*. Some of us may remember that he was one of the major European Catholic writers to reject the Franco uprising in Spain. He spent the Second World War in South America out of disgust with European politics, both right and left. He didn't have a sentimental bone in his body. He criticized Catholic politicians, Church leaders and average Catholics in the pew with the same and sometimes very funny relish. But he loved the Church, and he believed in Jesus Christ. And exactly 60 years ago, in 1946 and 1947, he gave a final series of lectures that predicted where our civilization would end up today with complete clarity. Regnery published the lectures in English in 1955 as *The Last Essays of Georges Bernanos*. I hope you'll read them for yourselves. They're outstanding.

Bernanos had an un-blinkered vision of the signs of the times. Remember that just after the Second World War, France had a revival of Catholicism. Recovering from a global conflict and the Holocaust, the world in general and France in particular seemed to turn back – briefly – to essentials. It was during that hopeful season that the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council gave us *Gaudium et Spes*.

But Bernanos always saw the problems beneath the veneer. He wasn't fooled by the apparent revival of Catholic France. And so his work is a great corrective to the myth that our moral confusion started in the 1960s. As Bernanos makes clear, our problems began with the machine age – the industrial revolution – but not simply because of machines. They were the fruit of a “de-spiritualization” that had been going on for some time.

Bernanos argues that the optimism of the modern West is a kind of whistling past the graveyard. The Christian virtue of hope, he reminds us, is a hard and strong thing that disciplines and perfects human appetites. It has nothing to do with mere optimism. Real Christian hope comes into play as the obstacles to human happiness seem to grow higher.

Bernanos takes it upon himself to show us just how high the obstacles to real human freedom have become, even in liberal democracies. He argues that our modern optimism is a veneer over a despair bred by our greed and materialism. We try to fool ourselves that everything will turn out for the best, despite all the evidence to the contrary – crime, terrorism, disease, poverty – and we even concoct a myth of inevitable progress to shore up our optimism. American optimism in particular – Bernanos refers to the United States bitterly as “the Rome, the Mecca, the holiest sanctuary of this civilization” – is really only the eager restlessness of unsatisfied appetites.

Two themes dominate these last essays by Bernanos. The first is man's eagerness to abolish, forget or rewrite his own history in favor of determinisms like liberal capitalism, which makes society nothing more than a market system, and Marxism. For Bernanos, the attack on human memory and history is a primary mark of the antichrist.

As Bernanos explains it, big ideological systems mechanize history with high-sounding language like progress and dialectics. But in doing so, they wipe out the importance of both the past – which they describe as primitive, unenlightened or counter revolutionary – and the present, which is not yet the paradise of tomorrow. The future is where salvation is to be found for every ideology that tries to eliminate God, whether it's explicitly atheistic or pays lip service to religious values. Of course, this future never arrives, because progress never stops and the dialectic never ends.

Christianity and Judaism see life very differently. For both of them, history is a place of human decision. At every moment of our lives, we're asked to choose for good or for evil. Therefore, time has weight. It has meaning. The present is vitally important as the instant that will never come again; the moment where we are not determined by outside forces but *self-determined* by our free will. Our past actions make us who we are today. But each day also offers us another chance to change our developing history. The future is the fruit of our past and present choices, but it's always unknown, because each successive moment presents us with a new possibility.

Time and freedom are the raw material of life because time is the realm of *human choice*. Bernanos reminds us that the antichrist wants us to think that freedom really doesn't exist because when we fail to choose, when we slide through life, we in effect choose for him. Time is the Devil's enemy. He lives neither in the eternity of God nor the realm of man. Satan has made his choice against God and he is forever fixed in that choice. But as long as man lives in time, which is the realm of change, man may still choose in favor of God. And of course, God is always offering the help of His grace to do just that. If the Devil can sell us the idea that history is a single, determined mechanism, if humanity's freedom of will can be forgotten or denied, then man will drift, and the antichrist will win.

Incidentally, if he were alive today, Bernanos might throw an interesting light on the language of the abortion debate. When we examine pro-choice vocabulary, it really isn't about choice at all. Instead, it's phrased in terms of what choice did I have? I couldn't choose *not* to have sex. I couldn't choose *not* to kill the child. You have no right to expect more from me; I *had* to have an abortion, and so I had a right to do it. In the abortion debate, pro-choice means agreeing to the fiction that nobody really had a choice. As for the Devil, rapid technological change very much serves his purposes in any bioethical debate by helping us believe that only the future matters and that there isn't time to consider fundamental questions.

Just a hundred years ago our material lives were not all that different from what they had been a thousand years before. Men walked and rode and tilled and sold. Suddenly, things have changed more in 100 years than they had in the previous 5,000. And we expect things to be different tomorrow from what they are today. What Bernanos says in his essays about the atomic bomb, we could say today about the technological tsunami that engulfs and submerges our lives. To a consumer culture that says we're essentially animals and smart monkeys incapable of restraint, technology has now given the most dangerous machines. Can they have come from God? Bernanos doesn't seem to think so.

One of my favorite quotes from Frank Sheed is this: *"It's incredible how long science has succeeded in keeping men's minds off their fundamental unhappiness and its own very limited power to remedy their fundamental unhappiness. One marvel follows another – electric light, phonograph, motor car, telephone, radio, airplane, television. It's a curious list, and very pathetic. The soul of man is crying for hope of purpose or meaning; and the scientist says, 'Here is a telephone,' or 'Look, television,' exactly as one tries to distract a baby crying for its mother by offering it sugar-sticks and making funny faces."*

The tidal wave of our toys, from iPods to the internet, is equally effective in getting us to ignore history and ignore our own emptiness.

The struggle for real human freedom depends upon the struggle for human history. Unlike the ideologies that deny the importance of the past and the present and focus on the illusions of a perfect future, Christianity sees the most important moments of the human story to be the past event of the Incarnation and the present moment of my individual opportunity to love.

The Catholic faith is grounded in what God *has done*. Our love is what we choose to *do*

now, and our hope is founded in God's past acts of love and our present ones. Without history, there is no Christianity. So the fundamental question, for Bernanos, is whether history is the story of mankind or merely of technology. Modern man must be convinced again that he is free, that he can really choose in this moment of time between very different paths to very different futures. In the act of choosing, we regain history as our own.

But part of the reasoning needed to convince man of his freedom must include reaffirming *sacred* history. And that must include remembering and retelling the fundamental choices made by Adam and Eve and Mary and Jesus and all the intermediate choices for or against God in that history. In hearing our Catholic faith narrated, it becomes recognizable as a history of choice, leading us to the present moment of choice, right here and right now. So the first requirement in regaining human freedom is to regain human history, to tell the human story as a chronicle of free will.

For Bernanos, the act of remembering the love of God and the history of our salvation begins the only kind of revolution that matters. In the words of Bernanos, "It is a question of starting tomorrow, or even today, a revolution of liberty which will essentially also be an explosion of spiritual forces in the world, comparable to the one that occurred 2,000 years ago – in fact, the same."

That revolution, the same revolution that occurred 2,000 years ago is already underway in every Catholic believer who confesses passionately and unapologetically – in his private life and in her public witness – that Jesus Christ is Lord, the Son of God, the messiah of Israel and the only savior of the world.

Every other lens we use for understanding the human story, whether we choose economics or gender or Darwin or race or something else, will ultimately lie to us about who we are. And we also lie to ourselves. The deepest tragedy of our age is how many of our own Catholic people who *claim* to believe in Jesus Christ, really don't in the way they live their lives. Flannery O'Connor once described a character called Mrs. May who "thought the word, Jesus, should be kept inside the church building like other words inside the bedroom. She was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true."

The common good is more than a political slogan. It's more than what most people think they want right now. It's not a matter of majority opinion or appetite. It can't be reduced to economic justice or social equality or better laws or civil rights, although all these things are vitally important to a healthy society.

The common good is what best serves human happiness in the light of what is real and true. That's the heart of the matter: *What is real and true?* If God exists, then the more man flees from God, the less true and real man becomes. If God exists, then a society that refuses to acknowledge or talk about God is suffering from a peculiar kind of insanity.

What can the common good mean in the context of Nietzsche's Superman or Marx or Freud or Darwin? These men became the architects of our age. But they were also just the latest expressions of a much deeper and more familiar temptation to human pride. We want to be gods, but we're not. When we try to be, we diminish ourselves.

That's our dilemma. That's the punishment we create for ourselves. There's a terrible humor in a man who claims that God is dead, then starts believing he's Dionysius or Jesus Christ, and then ends up on a candy bar made by out-of-work philosophers for middle-class consumers who just want some chocolaty goodness.

Humility is the beginning of sanity. We can't love anyone else until we can see past ourselves. And man can't even be man without God. The humility to recognize who we are, who God is, what God asks from us, and the reality of God's love for other human persons as well as ourselves – this is the necessary foundation that religion brings to every discussion of free will, justice and truth, and to every conversation about “the common good.” Sirach and Psalms and the Gospel of Luke and the Letter of James – these Scriptures move the human heart *not* because they're beautiful writings. They're beautiful writings because they spring from what we know in our hearts to be true.

Bernanos once said that, “the world will be saved only by free men. We must make a world for free men.” He also said that prudence – or rather, the kind of caution and fear that too often *pose* as prudence – is the one piece of advice he never followed. “When trouble is looking for you, he said, it's primarily a question of facing it, since it would be still more dangerous to turn your back on it. In that case, prudence is only the alibi of the cowardly.”

Friends, we most truly serve the common good by having the courage to be disciples of Jesus Christ. God gave us a free will, but we need to use it. Discipleship has a cost. Jesus never said that we didn't need a spine. The world doesn't need affirmation. It needs *conversion*. It doesn't need the approval of Catholics. It needs their *witness*. And that needs to begin with us. Bernanos said that the scandal of Creation [isn't] suffering but freedom. He said that, moralists like to regard sanctity as a luxury; actually it is a necessity. He also said that, one may believe that this isn't the era of the saints; that the era of the saints has passed. [But] it is *always* the era of the saints.

The only thing that matters is to be a saint. At least we can try. And if we do, God will take care of the rest.

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Archbishop Chaput was born in Kansas in 1944. He joined the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin in 1965 and was ordained a priest in 1970. He received a B.A. in Philosophy from St. Fidelis College Seminary in Herman, Pennsylvania. He later earned an M.A. in Religious Education at Capuchin College in Washington D.C., and an M.A. in Theology at the University of San Francisco.

He was named a theology professor and spiritual director at St. Fidelis in 1971. He was appointed secretary and director of communications for the Capuchin Province of St. Augustine in Pittsburgh in 1974. In 1977, he became pastor of Holy Cross Parish in Thornton, Colorado, and vicar provincial for the Capuchin Province of Mid-America. He became secretary and treasurer for the province in 1980, and chief executive and provincial minister three years later. He was named Bishop of Rapid City in 1988, and appointed Archbishop of Denver in 1997.