

CRISIS, CHURCH REFORM, AND THE LAY VOCATION

Francis X. Maier

St. Charles Borromeo Seminary

Archbishop's Lecture Series

9.23.19

A dozen or so years ago a colleague gave me a little wooden plaque for my office. I've had it on my bookshelf ever since. And on it are carved these words: "It *is* as bad as you think, and they *are* out to get you." The colleague who gave it to me is a Capuchin named Charles Chaput. The archbishop got it from a friend as a joke. He gave it to me as a joke. And of course it *is* a joke. But there are days when it's not so funny anymore.

This is a complicated time for American Catholics, and our problems as a Church come in two different categories: external and internal. Our main *external* problem is the canyon that exists between the abstract, ideal America we picture in our heads, and the real America we actually live in every day. America is, in a sense, a legal fiction. We have no common ethnicity. We have no long national history. We were created *ex nihilo* as a rational experiment in ordered liberty. And we're held together by a common commitment to the law; law that we sustain – or at least, that we were intended to sustain -- by a common biblical morality.

To make that new kind of a country work, as Tocqueville said 200 years ago, takes some very special ingredients. It needs a literate, mature, self-disciplined, and moral citizenry. Look around today, and ask yourselves if that's what we've got. The last 60 years have seen massive changes in our demography, science and technology, mass media, religious practice, education, wealth distribution, and legal theory. Much of it's wonderful and life-giving. Some of it's really dangerous, and here's an example: The presumption of innocence is a basic principle of our legal and political system. See how that works for you today if someone accuses you – falsely – of a sex crime. Especially if you're a priest.

The country we were six decades ago, and the country we are now, are two distinct creatures: similar on the surface; different underneath. And one of the differences is that we're now cocooned in a kind of narcotic haze of noise and consumer appetite that distracts us from understanding our situation and changing it for the better. We Catholics have been very quick to accept words like "diversity" and "inclusiveness" as positive values – and of course they are, when they're properly understood. But we've been very slow to grasp *how and to what end* those words are being used against us by a sexual revolution that's deeply intolerant of Christian belief.

One of the main struggles in our culture right now – maybe *the* jugular issue – is over who and what a human being is. It's at the heart of all our battles over sexual practice and identity. The birth of modesty in Scripture is connected to man's learning the hard way about good and evil, his self-awareness as a creature made in the image of God, and the duties that implies. But there's a deep streak of radical individualism in the American personality. And along with it goes a deep resentment of any constraints on our will to own and reinvent ourselves. So if the

Church says a man can't become a woman; or have sex with whomever, whenever, and however he wants; or a woman can't have as many abortions as she wants; then the Church is an agent of repression, and she needs to shut up or be muzzled. And that explains, at least in part, the constant religious freedom battles we now find ourselves locked into. It also helps to explain the toxic nature of our politics. It also explains why faithful Catholics need to be politically engaged.

Now the stuff I've just said can sound pretty dark, but I think it's the opposite. I think it's simply the truth, and the truth really does make us free; not comfortable, but free from some of our illusions. Free to see the world as it really is. We can't control the circumstances that other people create for us; but we can usually control how we respond to them.

It's a fact that there's a great deal of good in our nation. It's a fact that we Catholics have done very well in America economically. It's a fact that we've served – and continue to serve -- in our political and military institutions in great numbers and with great distinction.

But it's also a fact that Catholics have never entirely fit or been welcome in this country because of its Protestant and Enlightenment roots. By "Catholics" I mean Catholics who take their faith seriously, love and support their Church, and try to live what she teaches as a rule of life. I don't mean the tepid, or the indifferent, or the cynical whose name is Legion. I mean Catholics who try to live their faith in a way that materially shapes the world around us. Which is the whole point of discipleship.

The cost of assimilating into the American mainstream has been very high for Catholics, bleaching out or weakening many of the things that distinguish us as believers. And while that's distressing, it's not all bad. It reminds us, as believers, that our real home – our *mater et magistra*; our mother and teacher – is the Church. And of course, that brings us to our *internal* problems.

Georges Bernanos, the great French Catholic writer of the last century, described the Church as a vast transport company carrying people to heaven -- but one that's regrettably prone to train wrecks. Left to her human management, she tends to end up, in Bernanos' words, as a huge pile of overturned locomotives and burned out carriages. The thing that saves her from total catastrophe is her saints. And by "saints" he meant much more than just the holy men and women whose names we all know, and whose paintings can often seem saccharine in their piety or alien in their unreality. He meant the little people, the ordinary believers who love God and love the Church not just when it's easy, but when it's hard; not just when it's socially acceptable, but when it isn't. When it invites the contempt of the world.

Which, again, is where we are now. And it's ugly, isn't it, because we American Catholics thought we were a vital part of our national identity and purpose. We thought we *mattered*. Now we're being shed like dead skin in a culture indifferent to God. And we can't even defend ourselves because of the very real problems of dishonesty, sexual corruption, and financial mismanagement in the Church, and leadership within our own house that's often uninspiring -- and sometimes much worse.

It's right to be angry. But our anger needs to focus on building up the Church rather than tearing her down. Americans are bad at history, and there's a reason: Thinking about the past interferes with our cult of self-creation. So it's easy for us to forget that the Church has *always* been in crisis. Peace, purity, and unity for the Church are aberrations in her temporal life, not the standard. And the reason for that is brutally simple: She's inhabited and led by sinners.

In high school I had the privilege of learning Greek from a couple of terrific Jesuits. They were great teachers. We read Xenophon and Homer and a little Plato in the original, and it gave me a lifelong interest in words and their roots. There's a verb in ancient Greek, *krinein*, which means to decide; and a noun, *krisis*, which means decision. The Greek word *krisis* is the root of our English word, "crisis." And in a sense, that's what every human life is: It's a series of crises – one *krisis* or decision after another, determining the kind of person we become.

Here's why that matters. The tasks of helping to reform the Church and of living an authentic lay vocation begin or end with the central crisis facing each of us -- which is not "out there" in the external problems of our culture, but *in here*, in the conscience and soul of every one of us. It involves the decision in each of our hearts to stay in the Church or leave her; to stand with the Church or slip away; to believe what she teaches or not. Every person ends up worshiping some kind of a god that orders his or her life, including every atheist. There are no exceptions, and we all sooner or later, consciously or unconsciously, choose. Joshua put the god question to the tribes of Israel very directly when he asked: *which god will you serve?* For himself he said: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

I think most of us here tonight want to do the same. So with that out of the way, let's talk about Church reform.

I'll offer a few preliminary suggestions. And I won't spend time elaborating on them, because we can do that during questions. I think the most basic problem we face within the Church is one of faith, not of structures or resources. Money and structures follow strong beliefs. Too many of us don't really believe what we claim to believe.

Ordaining women -- even if that were possible, which it isn't -- won't change that. Celibacy didn't cause clergy sexual abuse, and a married priesthood won't fix that. Our Church leaders deserve the respect due their offices. But when they claim that the sexual abuse of children by clergy is mainly an issue of "clericalism," a lot of lay people hear that as insulting and absurd. My wife and I don't believe that. None of our friends with a family believes that. And we don't believe it *because it's just not true*. The fact that a man has a same-sex orientation does *not* mean he's going to abuse kids or even be attracted to them. But to downplay the major role homosexuality has played in the clergy abuse problem is frankly infuriating. And it feeds the criticism – some of it really poisonous and unjust – directed today at our American seminaries.

Finally, we need to remember that we belong to the Church. The Church doesn't belong to us -- at least, not like the clothes we wear, or the cars we drive. We don't "own" the Church any more than we own our families. Neither does the clergy. The Church is *ecclesiam suam*, his Church, God's Church; and laypeople, religious and clergy all have their distinct and necessary roles as God's agents in any genuine renewal.

Graham Greene once wrote that “behind the complicated details of the world stand the simplicities.” The good news about reforming the Church is that it’s actually pretty simple. The bad news is that it’s hard and takes a long time. The reason it’s hard is because it involves changing ourselves. Most of us don’t really want to do that. The reason it takes a long time is because individuals and communities, and their habits, are much harder to rewire than structures.

Changing structures can certainly be a good idea. But consider the following here in the United States.

Most U.S. bishops are good men heavily focused on their local realities. First because that’s their job, and second because the practical challenges of running a modern diocese are huge -- especially in a period of government and media pressure, and overall decline in sacramental practice. The diocesan problems people see from the outside are usually only the tip of the iceberg. The demands can be all-absorbing. In practice, this concedes national Church leadership to those bishops who have an appetite for it.

At the national bishops’ conference level, the paper flow created by inter-committee projects and consultations is massive. It’s almost impossible for any bishop to digest. This results in a reliance on conference staff, which means that support personnel naturally tend to influence policy. It can also result in too little influence on the part of many individual bishops, and too much influence for select bishops who are willing to invest the time in the conference system, and sufficiently skilled to master and work it.

As a result, real collegiality among bishops can often seem to occur *in spite of*, rather than because of, formal ecclesial structures. Why is that important? It’s important because it makes current arguments for decentralized Church “synodality” so problematic. In an age of confusion, decentralization can be a bad idea. But it’s an especially bad idea when the successful creatures of a national Church bureaucracy become -- in effect -- the formative authority in national Church life.

So now consider the Vatican’s current plan for reform of the Roman Curia, outlined in the document *Praedicate Evangelium*. The goal of the plan is to simplify and decentralize Vatican operations to serve the Pope’s focus on synodality. Synodality as a theory does have some merit; it has a flavor similar to the traditional Catholic principle of subsidiarity. It seeks to put more of the Church’s decision-making in the hands of local conferences of bishops who are closest to the needs of their people. On the surface, that sounds reasonable. Decentralizing Roman authority could be an admirable idea if every local Church were on the same page in matters of fundamental belief and practice. But we don’t live in that world. Quite the opposite. In Germany, *precisely* in the name of synodality, *de facto* schism is already, in a sense, real -- on issues of sexuality, divorce and remarriage, and other Catholic disciplines and beliefs.

More importantly, the authority to teach in the Church belongs to every individual bishop, not to synods or conferences.

Two of the reasons the Petrine ministry exists are to ensure Church unity, and to guarantee the faithful transmission of authentic Catholic belief. We owe the Pope – every Pope – our love, our respect, our prayers, and our fidelity. And it's not enough just to say it; we need to mean it. But fidelity in the Church is no different from fidelity in a good marriage. The mutual obedience of a husband and wife is ordered to truth. It requires speaking the truth with love to your spouse, especially on matters of substance, whether he or she wants to hear it or not.

My beautiful wife Suann will be happy to explain how that works because she's had a lot of experience doing it. The point is simply that it's very hard to see how the Holy Father's notion of synodality, in its timing and its meaning, combined with other problematic things now happening in Rome, really serves the renewal of Catholic life.

So that's a bummer. What can you and I do about it as ordinary laypeople? Well, first of all, we need to dump that word "ordinary." There's nothing ordinary about baptism. It's the sacrament that undergirds the entire Church. It makes every one of us a disciple and a missionary.

I asked a bishop friend once – he's serving now in a state out West -- what put him on the road to the priesthood. He said that when he was six or seven years old, his mother told him a story. When he was an infant, she took him to church. She laid him on the altar in the dark. And she asked God to protect and guide him to a life that would make a difference. She never pressed him to become a priest. But he could never get that story, and the idea that his life had a purpose, out of his head. And eventually it led him to the seminary.

I have another friend whose father clipped a picture from a mission magazine of a razor thin Maryknoll priest being mobbed by smiling African kids. His father blew it up four feet tall and then pinned it to their kitchen door. The family rarely talked about it. But for 10 years, with every mouthful of every meal the family ate, they looked at that picture, and it burned a sense of mission into his heart that affected his whole life.

And I have third friend who remembers a time when his mother accidentally broke a glass bottle that slashed open her palm. He remembers the towel wrapped around her hand because it was red with her blood. And still his mother knelt down to pray with his siblings and him when they were going to bed. Those prayers, and that woman's investment of love at a moment when she was in real pain, have never left his thoughts. These things happen all the time in a family of faith, with no drama but immense impact.

Lectoring, serving as extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, volunteering as catechists, or in social ministries, or on finance councils; joining a good lay apostolate or movement – all of these things are beautiful ways of expressing our Catholic sense of mission as laypersons. But it's the little things that emerge naturally from being absorbed in a love for God that imprint themselves intimately on the lives of other people. Any of us can do these things.

We laypeople are planted in the world to change the world. The money and talent we give to the Church are vitally important. The support we give to our priests and bishops is hugely important; and of course sometimes that support means telling them things and insisting on things – respectfully and with love, not barking or whining – that they may not want to hear. But

honesty is a virtue, and conflict on matters of real substance should never be avoided out of some misguided sense of courtesy.

I'll end by noting something that should be pretty obvious: Things change, but some things remain the same.

More than a century ago, Pope Leo XIII warned of some of the same problems we face today. I'll name just three examples: (a) a pattern of silence from some Church leaders "which purposely leads to the omission or neglect of some of the principles of Christian doctrine;" (b) an elite disdain for any kind of permanent vows as "alien to the spirit of our times in that they limit the bounds of human liberty," are only suitable for weak minds, and work against human perfection and the common good; and (c) internal pressure on Church leaders to "attract those who differ from [Catholic belief]," by reshaping Church teachings "more in accord with the spirit of the age . . . and [making] some concessions to new opinions," even in regard to doctrine.

All of these ideas are either explicit or strongly implied in many of today's religious journals. We hear them from many of our Church scholars and some of our Church leaders. And of course, *Humanae Vitae* – which Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI all repeatedly reaffirmed -- is now again being undermined. The sea change in spirit and purpose at Rome's John Paul II Institute, which focuses in a special way on marriage and the family, is very revealing. Talk about "new paradigms" in Church life too often masks a hunger to sign a peace treaty with the world; to make the Christian path more congenial and less embarrassing. But the cross is *never* congenial and *always* embarrassing; yet it's the unavoidable door through which we follow Jesus Christ.

So where does that leave us?

This morning I finished rereading *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

Early in the trilogy's second volume, *The Two Towers*, Aragorn -- who eventually becomes Gondor's king -- tells his friend Gimli the Dwarf that "ours is but a small matter in the great deeds of our time." It's a great line: *Ours is but a small matter in the great deeds of our time*. Of course the irony in those words is that the whole trilogy, the whole titanic struggle against very powerful evil that J.R.R. Tolkien writes into his story, hinges on two small, unimpressive, unimportant hobbits who refuse to abandon their task. They just do their job. They don't quit, even when it's hopeless and suicidal to keep going.

The lesson is this: Whether we're a mother or father, a secretary or mechanic, a teacher, tailor or candlestick maker, assistant to a bishop or the CEO of a Fortune 100 company, the lay vocation remains the same: using the raw material of our circumstances to give glory to God and to help other people share in his redemption through the witness of our lives.

If we do that, we've done what we were made for. And the world and the Church will be better for it.