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Chaput: We will lose religious freedom if we don't fight for it



Archbishop Charles J. Chaput at his Mass of installation in Philadelphia in 2011 (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)

INDIANAPOLIS -- "Unless we work hard to keep our religious liberty, we are going to lose it," Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia told members of the Catholic Press Association on the eve of the Fortnight for Freedom, the 14-day period beginning Thursday that will focus the attention of the Catholic community on what the bishops say is government intrusion on religious conscience, beliefs and practices.

"Nothing guarantees our freedoms except our willingness to fight for them," Chaput said, saying that "means fighting politically and through the courts without tiring and without apology."

The Fortnight for Freedom was introduced in a March document from the bishops' conference administrative committee titled "Our First, Most Cherished Liberty" in which they urge laity to work to protect religious freedom in the United States.

The document lists some examples of religious practice and beliefs under attack, including:

- The recent mandate by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that requires employers,

including most religious organizations, to provide contraceptive coverage in employee health care plans. In May, 43 Catholic organizations, including a dozen dioceses, filed a lawsuit in federal court against the mandate.

- The loss of government contracts for Catholic charities to provide foster care and adoption services in a number of states because the agencies refused to place children with same-sex couples or unmarried opposite-sex couples.
- The denial of contracts to Catholic humanitarian service agencies because they refuse to provide or refer clients to contraception or abortion services.

"Tomorrow we start a Fortnight for Freedom," Chaput said Wednesday, delivering the first keynote address at the 2012 Catholic Media Conference. "It is a moment for each of us to be grateful to our bishops for doing the right thing ... at the right time. If we don't press now and vigorously for our religious liberty in the public arena, we will lose it. Not overnight, not with a thunderclap, but step by step."

"Each of you plays a key role, a vital role in this effort, because our prestigious news media, with a very few exceptions, won't cover this issue in a fair and comprehensive way," he said.

Chaput made five points:

- "Religious freedom is a cornerstone of the American experience. This is so obvious that once upon a time, no one needed to say it. Times have changed." Almost all the founding fathers saw religious faith as vital to a free people, Chaput said. Liberty and happiness grow organically out of virtue, and virtue needs grounding in religious faith, he said.
- "Freedom of religious is more than freedom of worship." He added, "Real faith always bears fruit in public witness and public action. Otherwise, it is just empty words." The founders understood this, he said. "They created a nation designed in advance to depend on the moral conviction of moral believers and to welcome their participation in public life."
- "Threats to our religious freedom are not imaginary. They are happening right now. They are immediate, serious and real." Chaput cited examples of what he called "a pattern of government coercion" over religious practice and belief, including the HHS mandate. He also cited the recent Supreme Court decision in *Hosanna-Tabor v. EEOC*, which recognized a religious ministerial exemption from some employment laws, which he said was a victory for religious liberty. "What is stunning in this case is the disregard for religious liberty shown by the government's arguments against the Lutheran church and school."

Chaput said the hostility stems from the church's teaching on the sanctity of life and sexuality. He said critics of the church reduce all these moral convictions to an expression of a subjective religious belief, and if they are purely religious beliefs, critics say they can't be rationally defended. And because they are not rationally defensible, they should be treated as a form of prejudice.

"In effect, 2,000 years of moral tradition and religious belief become a species of bias," Chaput said. "Opposing same-sex marriage thus becomes religious-blessed homophobia."

When religious belief gets redefined as a private bias, religious identity and institutional ministry have no public value other than the utility of getting otherwise incredulous people to do good things, he said. So exempting Catholic adoption agencies with gay couples becomes a concession to private prejudice, and that becomes bigotry that hurts the public, "or so the reasoning goes."

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"This is how moral teaching and religious belief gets counted as hate speech," he said.

- "Unless we work hard to keep our religious liberty, we are going to lose it. This has already happened in other developed nations, like Britain and Canada. Nothing guarantees our freedoms except our willingness to fight for them."
- "Politics and the courts are important [but] our religious freedom ultimately depends on the vividness of our own Catholic faith. In other words, how deeply we believe and how honestly we live it. Religious liberty is an empty shell if the spiritual core of a people is weak."

"That is the reason Pope Benedict calls us a year of faith this October," he said. "The worst enemies of religious freedom aren't out there among the legion of critics that hate Christ or the Gospel or the church or all three -- the worst enemies are in here. It is us. All of us. It is the clergy, religious and lay when we live our faith in tepidness, routine and hypocrisy."

"Religious freedom is not a privilege granted by the state," Chaput said. "It is our birthright as children of God. ... We need to become people worthy of it, which means we need to change the way we live. Radically change. Both as individual Catholics and as the church."

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