

Abp Chaput's Sermon Closing the Fortnight

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 5, 2012 | Distinctly Catholic

The "Fortnight for Freedom" has come to a close. It never seemed like a first class public relations effort. The word "fortnight" is a fine word, but an unfamiliar one, ill-suited for a bumper sticker. There seemed to be little coordination among different dioceses. Many did nothing to mark the two weeks. Some mounted half-hearted efforts. Trying to get anything done in the last two weeks of June, when school gets out and people start their summer breaks, is always ill-advised.

But, yesterday's homily by Archbishop Charles Chaput at the closing Mass was one I would commend to all Catholics. (Rocco has the text [here](#) [1].) Finally, someone said, in as many words, the freedoms of the First Amendment, splendid though they be, have little in common with the freedom of the children of God which is the freedom that must most concern a believer. "And yet, the political and legal effort to defend religious liberty as vital as it is belongs to a much greater struggle to master and convert our own hearts, and to live for God completely, without alibis or self-delusion," Chaput said. "The only question that finally matters is this one: Will we live wholeheartedly for Jesus Christ? If so, then we can be a source of freedom for the world. If not, nothing else will do." Chaput preached on the Gospels, not the Federalist Papers.

Chaput's sermon was a stark contrast with that offered by Archbishop William Lori at the opening Mass of the fortnight. Lori has seemed to be laboring under a spectacularly ill-informed historical understanding of the Founding Fathers. His comments, in sermons and interviews, have failed to note that the negative conception of freedom, a freedom from, at the heart of the First Amendment is premised upon an anthropology and a politics that is quite at odds with Catholic anthropology and Catholic political ideas. For Catholics, man is not autonomous, but social, his rights are substantive and tied to responsibilities, framed by the need to pursue the good, not formal and without content as the Founders understood rights. For Catholics, politics entails ascertaining the common good, not the adjudication of competing interests by dividing power and reducing all political determinations of the good to a majority vote. Again, and again, I repeat: There is more work, theological work, to be done if any synthesis is to be forged between Catholic theology and the ideas that animated the Founding Fathers. Just because they spoke of freedom and we speak of freedom does not mean that we are speaking the same language.

It has been 45 years since Bernard Bailyn published his seminal work, "The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution." Subsequent scholars have added caveats and countours to Bailyn's essential thesis, but it has not been contradicted. And what was that thesis? Essentially Bailyn's thesis was that the thinking of the founding generation was shaped by a variety of influences. Men like Jefferson and Adams had read deeply among classical authors, Pliny, Tacitus, Sully. They were all familiar with the writings of John Locke to be sure, although unaware of some of the Catholic roots of the natural rights philosophy Locke had championed. The French philosophes, Voltaire, Rousseau and Co., were well known among the founders. The Common Law tradition played a part, as did the experience of the colonists in de facto self-governance. But, at a time when the most frequently published documents were still sermons, an over-reliance on the secular sources of American ideas about liberty and politics seemed of insufficient explanatory value, especially for the whole of society as opposed to the few elites who went to Philadelphia in 1776. Bailyn delved into the pamphlets published in the

generation before 1776 and found a core, organizing narrative that animated almost all of them:

The pamphlets do reveal the influence of Enlightenment thought, and they do show the effective force of certain religious ideas, of the common law, and also of classical literature; but they reveal most significantly the close integration of these elements in a pattern of, to me at least, surprising design? surprising because of the prominence in it of still another tradition, interwoven with, yet still distinct from, these more familiar strands of thoughts. This distinctive influence had been transmitted most directly to the colonists by a group of early eighteenth-century radical publicists and opposition politicians in England who carried forward into the eighteenth century and applied to the politics of the age of Walpole the peculiar strain of anti-authoritarianism bred in the upheaval of the English Civil War. This tradition, as it developed in the British Isles, has in part been the subject of extensive research by Caroline Robbins, forming the substance of her "Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthmen," [Bailyn then cites the work of other scholars]?. I began to see a new meaning in phrases that I, like most historians, had readily dismissed as mere rhetoric and propaganda: ?slavery,? ?corruption,? ?conspiracy.? These inflammatory words were used so forcefully by writers of so great a variety of social statuses, political positions, and religious persuasions; they fitted so logically into the pattern of radical and opposition thought; and they reflected so clearly the realities of life in an age in which monarchical autocracy flourished, in which the stability and freedom of England?s ?mixed? constitution was a recent and remarkable achievement, and in which the fear of conspiracy against constituted authority was built into the very structure of politics, that I began to suspect that they meant something very real to both the writers and their readers: that there were real fears, real anxieties, a sense of real danger behind these phrases, and not merely the desire to influence by rhetoric and propaganda the inert minds of an otherwise passive populace.

Bailyn's great work came to mind when I read Archbishop Chaput's sermon because he opened with a quote from the great French poet Claudel who described the Christian as ?a man who knows what he is doing and where he is going in a world [that] no longer [knows] the difference between good and evil, between yes and no. He is like a god standing out in a crowd of invalids . . . He alone has liberty in a world of slaves.? Liberty versus slavery. What Bailyn shows is that when the American colonists who led the American Revolution invoked this contrast between liberty and slavery, they meant something very specific. The words were rooted in the thought of the Commonwealthmen, and became known as Country Whig ideology. When Britons sing the chorus in ?Rule, Britannia!? and voice the conviction that ?Britons never, never, never will be slaves? they were not voicing the fear that they could wake up next morning to find themselves black, on a plantation, as chattel slavery. They meant by slavery something different, something Catholic and something French. The Commonwealthmen did not so much fear a return of Catholicism to Great Britain, although the Battle of Culloden, the last effort to return the Catholic Pretender (actually, it was the Protestant Kings and Queens who were the Pretenders, no?) to the throne, was fought in 1746. They feared the ?popish? influences on the Tory Party. They feared ?priestcraft? and ?arbitrary authority? which to them meant a religion not based on an individual's right to read and interpret the Bible as he saw fit and a kingly government free from parliamentary oversight. For the American colonists, the experience of the French and Indian War, 1754-1763, made the threat of French Catholicism all the more real, even though they won the war. Britain's Commonwealthmen, writers like Algernon Sidney, were widely read in the colonies, and aped by home grown preachers like Jonathan Mayhew. The historian Patricia Bonomi's book ?Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society and Politics in Colonial America? expands on Bailyn's thesis, showing how specific crises, such as the last Jacobite invasion that ended at Culloden, but also homegrown events, like the fear aroused at the prospect of an Anglican bishop being appointed to America, gave renewed currency to the Country Whig ideology Bailyn uncovered in the pamphlets of the times.

You would not know it from most of the literature issued during the Fortnight for Freedom. You probably would not know it from most textbooks. And, you would not know it from reading John Courtney Murray. But

the American Founding had a distinctly anti-Catholic flavor to it. The experience of the French alliance during the war did a great deal to alleviate the hostility to Catholicism, as did the ideas of tolerance at the heart of the Enlightenment. But, as an intellectual worldview, Catholicism and Catholic thought were precisely what the American founders opposed and it is why outbreaks of anti-Catholicism have seemed so normal in the life of the nation. Paul Blanshard, writing in the 1950s, was not a mere anti-Catholic bigot. His rantings had a pedigree that reached back into alternative meanings of "America," "freedom," "rights," from what we Catholics mean. Blanshard was horrible, but he was not un-American.

I hope readers will take the time to read Archbishop Chaput's sermon. One of the lessons of 1789 is that the Church was so weakened by its own lack of faith, its own corruptions, that it could scarcely mount a protest as it first lost its privileges, then its lands, finally its right to control itself. Chaput's call to a deeper, more radical commitment to Jesus and His Church should ring true in every age, but it rings true now and not just because of the HHS mandate. This whole kerfuffle with the Obama administration should serve as an occasion to inform ourselves about how our Catholic faith points our hearts and minds in ways that are different from the mainstream. It invites us to think more deeply about the unresolved theological issues regarding conscience rights in civil society. It invites us, too, to recognize all the accomplishments of modernity, and see if we cannot find ways to rescue them from the faulty anthropological foundations on which they sit. But, at least, Archbishop Chaput challenged us to be Catholics and did not indulge this sloppy, facile effort to baptize the First Amendment and canonize James Madison. Everyone should read his sermon. Every should read Bailyn and Bonomi. The issues that face us Catholics in the U.S. are deeper than a fight over who pays for contraception coverage.

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[1] <http://whispersintheloggia.blogspot.com/2012/07/at-fortnights-close-we-belong-to-god.html>