NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

MSW Praises +Chaput: Hell to Freeze Over Soon!

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 18, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Thanks to Rocco for posting the text [1] of Archbishop Charles Chaput?s talk in Mexico City this weekend. I have not been shy in my criticisms of Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia. So, I take a special delight, and have a special responsibility, to applaud him when I think he hits a home run and, in his speech at the Conference on Ecclesia in America in Mexico City, +Chaput hit a home run.

+Chaput focused on three issues in his talk, starting with poverty. He said:

Poverty is an acid that destroys human kinship. It burns away the bonds of mutual love and obligation that make individuals into a community. The United States is the richest, most powerful nation in history. But one in every six persons in my country now lives below the poverty line. And poverty always, inevitably comes with a family of other ugly issues: hunger, homelessness, street crime, domestic violence, unemployment, human trafficking.

All of these evils now belong to the shadow side of both urban and rural life in my country. They eat away at our sense of justice. They undermine the integrity of our public discourse. The trouble is that the economy of the United States still succeeds so well for so many of its people that the poor become invisible. And being invisible, they can be ignored.

These are powerful words, and they are not the cold words of a policy analyst or cultural observer, but the words of an observant pastor who has seen poverty and what it does to people, not just to Department of Labor statistics.

We can all especially commend +Chaput?s comment about poverty and the poor becoming invisible. The last month of reporting on the implementation of the Affordable Care Act is only the most recent example. Yes, some people with insurance have had their policies canceled, something that happens with regularity this time of year in any event, but this year, the cancellations are all blamed on the ACA, whether it be the cause or not. These same people whose policies have been canceled have had insurance, perhaps lousy insurance, but they have had it. Very little attention has been focused on the much larger universe of people who have lacked it and now, thanks to the ACA, have been able to acquire it. This is especially the case for those who have signed up for Medicaid. It is shocking that so many Republican governors and legislatures have refused to expand Medicaid because of their hostility to the ACA. This is especially the case in Texas which has the largest percentage of uninsured citizens in the country. But, the uninsured are invisible because they are poor and the poor have no powerful lobbying firm in DC.

Archbishop Chaput then goes on to examine a different variety of poverty. He writes:

I mean the moral poverty that comes from an advanced culture relentlessly focused on consuming more of everything; a culture built on satisfying the self; a culture that runs on ignoring the needs of other people. That

kind of poverty, as Mother Teresa saw so well, is very much alive in my country. It?s like a parasite of the soul. It leaves us constantly eating but constantly hungry for something more ? all the while starving the spirit that makes us truly human.

And like material poverty, moral poverty has consequences. It brings fear of new life, a turning away from children, confused sexuality and broken marriages. It results in greed, depression, ugliness and aggression in our popular culture, and laws without grounding in truth. Real human development takes more ? much more ? than better science, better management and better consumer goods, though all these things are wonderful in their place. Human happiness can?t be separated from the human thirst for meaning. Material things can?t provide that meaning. Abundance can murder the soul as easily as scarcity can. It?s just a different kind of poverty. This is why Ecclesia in America rightly wondered ?whether a pastoral strategy directed almost exclusively to meeting people?s material needs has not in the end left their hunger for God unsatisfied, making them vulnerable to anything which claims to be of spiritual benefit? (73).

The sentence ?Abundance can murder the soul as easily as scarcity can,? is one for the ages. Too often, conservative cultural critics decline to criticize the consumerism of our culture and how it robs the soul of dignity and makes people forgetful of God, whose love cannot be purchased on sale the day after Thanksgiving. And, in our own day, how many liberal politicians have nothing to offer by way of economic policy besides a ?growth strategy.?

These comments of +Chaput?s are especially relevant, I think, to the one part of his speech that I had trouble with. He states, ?But I do know that when I spoke at the Special Assembly for America 16 years ago, I spoke from a moral consensus in the United States that was still largely Christian. Today that is no longer the case.? I would like him to elaborate on this because I do not recall any ?moral consensus? in the United States sixteen years ago or, indeed, for any of my fifty-one years on this planet or most of our history as a nation. In 1997, during the Synod of the Americas, there was no moral consensus on the rights of gay men and women, nor on the need for some kind of universal health insurance, nor on the emerging income inequality among our citizens, nor on the rights of workers, nor on the legality of abortion. In the 1950s and 1960s, our nation was wracked by the lack of a moral consensus on race relations. In the 1930s, there was no moral consensus on the responsibility of the state to protect the poor, nor to intervene in Europe to stop the rise of fascism. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was no moral consensus, including within the hierarchy of the Catholic Church on what now seems to us an easy call: Child labor laws.

The reason I ask for more explication on this point is because I think +Chaput?s earlier comments about materialism and consumerism point to the reasons for his concern. I do not think that we can blame intellectual elites for the decline in Christian cultural referents. I don?t think the academy has that much sway. Nor do I think all the blame lies at the feet of the media, although they certainly manage to be as offensive as they are ennobling. No, I think the principal ?acids of modernity,? to use Lippmann?s phrase, eating away not only at belief but at the disposition to believe, are those the modern market economy had yielded, teaching our youngsters to be consumers before they are taught to be communicants, the prominence of television as a baby sitter in many households which no longer have extended families under one roof, so that children grow up in such a way that their first experiences of sadness is not their own experience, but watching a television actor play at being sad. As our children grow, they encounter an endless series of quick, purchasable fixes to all problems, and begin to adopt a mechanistic, consumer attitude towards those facets of life which cannot be purchased or even measured. The economic pressures on our families strike them in adulthood. And, the elderly, like the poor, are put out of sight and out of mind, a kind of self-inflicted cultural amputation of all their wisdom and love.

Archbishop Chaput?s comments on drugs and episcopal leadership are also worthy of attention, but I have gone on long enough. Yesterday, I sent a link to Archbishop Chaput?s comments to a dear priest friend and indicated

that I intended to call attention to this splendid talk. My friend rejoined that he will be on the lookout for signs of global freezing! Truly, it is a delight to be able to commend the words of someone with whom I so often disagree.

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Links:
[1] http://whispersintheloggia.blogspot.com/2013/11/at-guadalupe-chaputs-new-world.html