

Archbishop Chaput: No unity among U.S. bishops on sanctions for abortion support

NOTRE DAME, Ind. - Archbishop Charles J. Chaput gave a frank response when asked why there is so much disunity among Catholics on the question of Catholics in political life standing clearly with the church on major moral issues such as abortion.

"The reason ... is that there is no unity among the bishops about it," said the Denver archbishop, who was asked the question after his April 8 keynote address for the University of Notre Dame Right to Life Club's spring lecture series.

"There is unity among the bishops about abortion always being wrong, and that you can't be a Catholic and be in favor of abortion - the bishops all agree to that - but there's just an inability among the bishops together to speak clearly on this matter and even to say that if you're Catholic and you're pro-choice, you can't receive holy Communion," Archbishop Chaput said.

Individual bishops probably do take such a stand privately more often than anyone knows, the archbishop noted, and he said he is not in favor of refusing Communion without giving private notice ahead of time to the person. He emphasized, however, that Catholics who support keeping abortion legal should be told that they will not be given Communion, and not to present themselves to receive.

Archbishop Chaput said he and others have been trying to move the U.S. bishops' conference to speak clearly on this issue for a number of years. However, there is a fear, he said, that if they do so, the bishops might somehow disenfranchise the Catholic community from political life, making it difficult to get elected if a Catholic politician has to hold the church's position on issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage.

The strategy clearly has failed, he continued, "So let's try something different and see if it works. Let's be very, very clear on these matters," and he asked the

audience to “help me to convince the bishops on that subject.”

The archbishop’s talk on “Politics and the Devil: Living in a World of Unbelief” touched on many of the topics in his 2008 book, “Render Unto Caesar: Serving the Nation by Living Our Catholic Beliefs in Political Life” (Doubleday Religion).

“There is no such thing as morally neutral legislation or morally neutral public policy,” he said. “Every law is the public expression of what somebody thinks we ought to do. The question that matters is this: Which moral convictions of which somebodies are going to shape our country’s political and cultural future?”

The answer is obvious, Archbishop Chaput continued: “If you and I as citizens don’t do the shaping, then somebody else will. That is the nature of a democracy. A healthy democracy depends upon people of conviction working hard to advance their ideas in the public square respectfully and peacefully, but vigorously and without apologies.”

Most people root their moral convictions in their religious beliefs, he explained, for what people believe about God shapes what they think about the nature of the human person and our idea of a just society. And if a citizen fails to bring his moral beliefs into our country’s political conversation and work for them publicly and energetically, he said, the defeat of his own beliefs will be ensured.

“We act on what we really believe,” Archbishop Chaput said. “If we don’t act on our beliefs, then we don’t really believe them.”

The idea that the separation of church and state should force us to exclude our religious beliefs from guiding our political behavior makes no sense at all, he continued:

“If we don’t remain true in our public actions to what we claim to believe in our personal lives, then we only deceive ourselves, because God certainly isn’t fooled: He sees who and what we are. God sees that our duplicity is really a kind of cowardice, and our lack of courage does a lot more damage than simply wounding our own integrity; it also saps the courage of other good people who really do try to publicly witness what they believe. And that compounds the sin of dishonesty and

the sin of injustice.”

Archbishop Chaput said that the moral and political struggle today in defending human dignity is becoming more complex. “Abortion is the foundational human rights issue of our lifetime,” he said, adding that “you can’t build a just society and at the same time legally sanctify the destruction of generations of unborn human life.”

Working to end abortion doesn’t absolve Catholics from the obligation to serve the poor, disabled, elderly or immigrants, he added. “But none of these other duties can obscure the fact that no human rights are secure if the right to life is not.”

The archbishop’s lecture was sponsored by the Notre Dame Fund to Protect Human Life and the Notre Dame Center for Ethics and Culture.