

Franciscan University Presents
“The Mission of the Church in the New America”
With guest, Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.

**The Mission of the Church in the New America: Augustine, Francis
and the future**

By Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap

Much of what I say today is adapted from *Strangers in a Strange Land*, a book I’ve written that will be published by Henry Holt & Co. in February. The good news is that if you don’t like the talk, I’ve saved you \$20. The other good news is that if you *do* like the talk, there’s a lot more of the same in the book. The not-quite-so good news is that you’ll have to buy it. Please.

So let’s begin.

Back when dinosaurs walked the earth, and the world and I were young – or at least *younger* -- the singer Bobby McFerrin had a hit tune called “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.” The lyrics were simple. Basically he just sang the words “don’t worry, be happy” more than 30 times in the space of four minutes. But the song was fun and innocent, and it made people smile. So it was very popular.

That was in 1988. Before the First Iraq War. Before 9/11. Before Al Qaeda, Afghanistan, the Second Iraq War, the 2008 economic meltdown, the Benghazi fiasco, the Syria fiasco, the IRS scandal, the HHS mandate, the *Obergefell* decision, the ghoulish Planned Parenthood videos, the refugee crisis, Boko Haram, ISIS, and the terror attacks in Paris, San Bernardino and Orlando.

And yet, in a way he never intended, McFerrin had it right. Despite everything wrong with the world, Christians *shouldn’t* worry. We *should* be happy. John Paul II, in the first moments of his pontificate, urged us to “be not afraid.” This, from a man who lived through the Second World War and the two worst murder regimes in history. And when the current Holy Father, Pope Francis, called us back to the “joy of the Gospel” – as he did in his first apostolic exhortation – he too reminded us that, as Christians, we have every reason to hope. We have no excuse to look like we’ve just come back from a funeral.¹

Given all the hatred in the world, a belief in the goodness of life can seem foolish. Skeptics tend to think of religion as either organized sentimentality or a kind of dangerous mental weakness. But Christian faith properly lived has never been an emotional crutch or a weapon for hurting others. It’s true that people can and do misuse religion to do terrible things. But Christians can only do that by betraying the Gospel we claim to serve.

I think Pope Francis sees the suffering in the world very clearly. Having lived through the “Dirty War” in Argentina from 1976-83, he’s anything but naïve. As we close out another Church year, it’s worth rereading paragraphs 84-86 in *Evangelii Gaudium* because Pope Francis very

forcefully warns us against the kind of pessimism that can turn the hearts of good people into hearts of stone.

“Nobody can go off to battle,” Francis writes, “unless he is fully convinced of victory beforehand. If we start without confidence, [we’ve] already lost half the battle . . . Christian triumph is always a cross, yet a cross which is at the same time a victorious banner borne with aggressive tenderness against the assaults of evil. The evil spirit of defeatism is brother to the temptation to separate, before its time, the wheat from the weeds; it is the fruit of an anxious and self-centered lack of trust.”²

Like St. Paul, Francis sees the source of Christian joy in the act of preaching the Gospel; in a passion for living the Good News and actively sharing the person of Jesus Christ with others. This is why he has such urgent words for tepid Christians. This is why he can seem so impatient with believers who let their hearts grow cold. If we don’t share our faith, we lose it. Without a convincing faith, we can’t experience hope because we have no reason to trust in the future. And without hope, we turn more and more inward and lose the capacity to love.

People typically see the Holy Father as a man formed by the example of Ignatius Loyola and Francis of Assisi. And of course that’s true. His spirituality is clearly Jesuit, and his desire for a simple Church close to the poor is clearly Franciscan. But I think his hunger for God also has another source.

In a 2013 homily to the general chapter of the Order of St. Augustine, Francis asked the delegates to “look into your hearts and ask yourself if you have a heart that wants great things or a heart that is asleep. Has your heart maintained [Augustine’s] restlessness or has it been suffocated by things?”³ The passion and restlessness in this Pope’s own heart mirror the great Augustine who saw that our hearts can never rest until they rest in God – the God who, in Augustine’s words, is “Beauty so old and so new;” the God whom Augustine longed for as life’s “sovereign joy.”

It might seem odd to link Francis and Augustine because between them runs a canyon of perceived differences in personality and style. For the mass media, Francis is the sunny reformer dragging an ancient institution into the light of the 21st century. Augustine is the sober Christian polemicist from a dark and barbarous past. But we should ask ourselves: What really constitutes barbarism? And which moment in history is really the one with more light? There’s a paradox about Francis that reporters tend to gloss over. The Pope who smiles so often, speaks so kindly and holds joy in such high regard, also has the awkward habit of talking about the devil.

By his own account, Francis has read *Lord of the World* – Robert Hugh Benson’s novel about the Antichrist and the end of the world – three or four times. And when he speaks about the devil, which he does with some frequency, he doesn’t mean a symbol of evil or a metaphor about man’s appetite for destruction. Francis means exactly what the Church has always taught. Satan is a real personal being, a supremely intelligent spirit, a rebel against God and an enemy of everything human.⁴

Lord of the World was published in 1907, right at the start of the 20th century. It was a time when the achievements of science seemed sure to bear fruit in a new age of reason, peace, human dignity and progress, without the primitive baggage of God or superstition. If the modern era has a high point of confidence in humanity's independence and possibilities, *Lord of the World* captured its pride perfectly. And yet within 10 years, every shred of that confidence and an entire way of life were destroyed by the First World War. The 20th century, despite all of its accomplishments, became the bloodiest in history. It's hard to imagine anyone *not* believing in the existence of the devil after the Holocaust or the Gulag or Pol Pot.

So again, what constitutes barbarism? And which moment in time is really the more challenging -- the world of the fifth century bishop of Hippo, or the world of today's bishop of Rome?

The irony of our present moment is that the same tools we use to pick apart and understand the natural world, we now use against ourselves. We're the specimens of our own tinkering; the objects of our social and physical sciences. In the process, we've lost two things. We've lost our ability to see anything sacred or unique in what it means to be human. And we've lost our capacity to believe in anything that we can't measure with our tools. As a result, we're haunted by the worry that none of our actions really has any larger purpose at all.

The post-Christian developed world runs not on beliefs but on pragmatism. In effect -- for too many people -- comfort and security have replaced conviction. Our political institutions haven't changed. Nor have the words we use to talk about rights and laws and ideals. But they no longer have the same content. We're a culture of autonomous consumers that uses noise and distractions to manage our lack of shared meaning. What that produces in its members is a drugged heart -- a heart neither restless for God, nor able to sacrificially love and empathize with others.

For Augustine, every person in the world actually belongs to one of two *invisible* cities that will commingle until the end of time -- the City of Man, composed of the wicked, distracted and indifferent, and the City of God, made up of God's pilgrim people on earth.

Sinners hide among the saints, and saints among the sinners. Only God knows the truth of each person. And only he can winnow the wheat from the chaff at the end of time. Meanwhile, the two cities overlap. That leaves Christians with the task of living their faith well in a broken world. And it raises a key question: Can an African bishop dead for nearly 1,600 years offer anything useful, here and now, to American Christians who live in a very different world?

I'll answer that with three simple points.

First, Augustine would say that we *don't* live in such a very different world. Many of the details of daily life have changed -- our tools, memories and expectations; our frames of thought and our command of nature. But the human condition is basically the same. We're born; we grow; we die. We ask what our lives mean. We wonder whether any larger purpose guides the world, and why the people we love age and weaken, and then pass on. Beauty still pierces our hearts. Hurting the poor and the weak still shames us. Augustine's two cities are still with us. And in their essentials, they're still very much the same.

Second, Augustine would remind us that as long as the City of God and the City of Man are commingled, “we [believers] also enjoy the peace of Babylon.” In other words, despite the ugliness that often dominates our politics, the temporal peace provided by the state allows us to sojourn more or less unmolested toward heaven.⁵ Therefore Christians have a duty to pray for earthly rulers – even the ones we greatly dislike.

The election earlier this week reminds us that Augustine’s attitude toward politics was a mixture of deep skepticism and moral obligation. For Augustine, sin infects even the best human motives. No political party is pure. No political order, no matter how seemingly good, can ever constitute a just society.

But we can’t simply withdraw from public affairs. St. Benedict could retreat to the Italian countryside, but Augustine had no such option. He was a bishop intimately tied to his people and their society. Like his people, he was deeply entangled in everyday life. So for Augustine, the classic civic virtues named by Cicero – prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance – could be renewed and elevated by the Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity. Therefore, political engagement can be a worthy Christian task. Public office can be an honorable Christian vocation. But any Christian involvement in politics needs to be ruled by modest expectations and humility. Success, when it happens, will always be limited. No law will ever be ideal.⁶

My third and final point is this. If the key sin of the 19th and early 20th centuries was pride, the key sin of the 21st century is despair. The modern world’s rejection of any transcendence, of any reality beyond the horizon of this world, has a crippling effect on the human spirit, even within the believing community. There’s a great temptation even among many Christians right now to focus on the horizontal to the exclusion of the vertical; to compromise with sinful patterns of life and to reduce Christian truths about marriage, sexuality and other inconvenient matters to a set of beautiful but rarely achievable ideals — which then leads to surrendering the redemptive mission of the Church.

Again: We live in a time when the product of man’s reason – the creature we call science – now seems to undermine reason itself; to discredit free will; and to diminish anything unique about what it means to be human. But as a culture, we still cling to the idea that progress is more or less inevitable. And our educated classes often seem willing to believe in just about anything, so long as it doesn’t involve God.

Augustine would find none of this surprising. The Rome of Roman greatness, the Rome of people’s happy imagination, no longer existed and really never existed when he wrote *City of God*. We need to examine our own nation with the same realism. There’s much to love, and a lot worth fighting for, in this country we call our home. As Christians, we’re here, in part, to make the world a better place. But this world is *not* our home, not really. And Augustine would tell us never to forget that.

I began my comments today with the words of that great 20th century theologian, Bobby McFerrin – *don’t worry, be happy* – and the urgency of Pope Francis in preaching the joy of the Gospel. But what do we mean by joy? It’s more than satisfaction. More than pleasure or

contentment. Even the word “happiness” doesn’t really capture it. Joy is the experience and indwelling of *delight*. It’s the exhilaration we find in the discovery of some great beauty, or truth, or gift, and the passion that drives us to share it with others, even if we suffer in the process. In effect, we don’t possess joy; *joy possesses us*.

One of the reasons the Holy Father may seem so frustrated with the state of the Church today is that, in his experience, too many Christians confuse doctrine and law, rituals and structures, with the real experience of faith. Obviously these things are important. Augustine would say that they’re *very* important, because without them our faith is disincarnate and little more than a collection of warm feelings. The Church can only be harmed by an overly sentimental or anti-intellectual spirit in her work. In an “emotivist” age, the last thing we need is a flight from clear teaching.

But Augustine would agree with Francis that the structural elements of Church life become empty and dead when they’re not animated by love; in other words, if they don’t proceed from a living relationship with Jesus Christ. We can too easily use them as a hiding place from the real task of discipleship, which is preaching the Gospel by our lives and our actions.

Did Augustine know joy? Read his *Confessions*. You be the judge. In his sermons, Augustine called this earth “a smiling place.” Portions of his work read like a litany to the goodness and beauty of creation.⁷ His biographer, Peter Brown, describes him as a man immoderately in love with the world. And the reason is simple. Augustine loved the world because he was in love with the Author of the beauty and goodness he found there.

What does that mean for us today? I think Augustine would tell us that the real problem with the world is bigger than climate change or abortion or poverty or family breakdown, and it’s much more stubborn. The real problem with the world is us.

As Augustine said in his sermons, it’s no use complaining about the times, because *we are the times*. How we live shapes them. And when we finally learn to fill our hearts with something more than the noise and narcotics of the wounded societies we helped create; when we finally let our hearts rest in God as Augustine did; then – and *only* then -- the world will begin to change, because God will use the witness of our lives to change it.

Before I close, I want to share just a few final thoughts.

Last Saturday the *Wall Street Journal* ran an essay by two psychologists with the title “A Truce for Our Tribal Politics.” The content was praiseworthy. It offered tips on how to get along with people you just spent the last 12 months of an election cycle demonizing -- or being demonized *by*. And much of the counsel was admirable. The authors rightly stressed that “civility doesn’t require consensus or the suspension of criticism. It is simply the ability to disagree productively with others while respecting their sincerity and decency.”⁸

Normally no one could argue with those words, because they make good sense. As Christians, we always have a duty to treat other persons with charity and justice. Mutual respect is a cornerstone of any good society. But we don’t live in “normal” times. The pace and drastic

nature of the changes transforming our culture prove it every day. This is a time in America when scholars at our leading law schools write legal tracts with titles like “Against Parental Rights.”⁹ And if the prospect of judges invading the family and stripping away parental rights sounds outlandish, so did the kind of flawed legal reasoning in the *Windsor* and *Obergefell* Supreme Court decisions only a decade ago.

We’ve just lived through eight years of an administration that came to power on promises of hope, mutual respect, civility and a search for common ground. Then it violated all those things and delivered *exactly the opposite behavior* on a range of issues deeply important to Christian believers. The next four years may be no better. With that in mind, Catholic readers of Saturday’s *Wall Street Journal* essay may not *quite* be ready to embrace people who just last week stuffed us in the “basket of deplorables.”

That’s understandable. It’s also prudent. Being soothed when we need to be clearheaded and principled is not helpful. Appropriate anger at being manipulated – let’s not forget the WikiLeaks emails -- is not a sin. Not all forceful disagreement is unwarranted, as Jesus himself showed the moneychangers. And not all skepticism is bad.

But for our own sake, and the sake of the people our lives touch, we need to stay anchored in the knowledge of God’s love, the God who remains king even as presidents come and go. The mission of the Church in the “new America” – a nation now adrift from its own founding vision - is the same mission she’s had all along. It’s to lead souls to salvation, to support the weak, to comfort the suffering, to strengthen the faithful, to sanctify and renew the world wherever possible in the name of Jesus Christ – and in doing all of this, *to speak the truth with love*, whether the powerful want to hear it or not.

Truth without love is a weapon. And love without truth isn’t really “love” at all, but merely a sentiment that survives only as long as a person’s warm feelings sustain it.

In the end, if we want the *joy* of the Gospel, we need to be willing to love and witness and suffer for the truth contained on every page of the Gospel – the truth which allows the seed of joy to grow; the truth about God and the nature of his love; the truth about the meaning and sanctity of the human person.

The cost of that discipleship, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously wrote, is high. But the reward – both in this world and the next -- is infinitely higher.

Franciscan University of Steubenville, 11.10.16

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*** *City of God* by St. Augustine. Penguin Classics. 14th Edition**

*** *The Lord of the World* by Robert Hugh Benson. Apostrophe Books.**

*** *The Joy of the Gospel – Apostolic Exhortation* by Pope Francis. Image. 1st Edition.**

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¹ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 10

² *Ibid.*, 85

³ “Pope says Christians should have restless hearts like St. Augustine’s,” Catholic News Service, August 28, 2013

⁴ Romano Guardini, a major influence on Francis' thought, had a vivid understanding of Satan as a personal and malignant spiritual being. See Guardini's *The Faith and Modern Man*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1952, p. 139-154. See also Guardini's *The Lord*, Regnery Gateway, Washington, DC, 1982, p. 132-139 and especially 604.

⁵ Augustine, *City of God*, Book XIX, Chapter 26

⁶ For a discussion of Augustine's approach to politics, see Robert Dodaro, O.S.A., *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2004. See also Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Augustine and the Politics of Limits*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 1995.

⁷ Augustine, *De Trinitate*

⁸ Jonathan Haidt and Ravi Hyer, "A Truce for Our Tribal Politics," *Wall Street Journal*, C1, November 5-6, 2016

⁹ Samantha Godwin, "Against Parental Rights," *Columbia Human Rights Law Review*, March 2015