

*This article is part of a series of talks delivered by Archbishop Charles J. Chaput on July 4-5, 2007 in Melbourne, Australia during the National Conference of the Australian Confraternity of Catholic Clergy. The archbishop of Denver reminds the clergy of their mission: to preach the Word of life with power, to incarnate that Word through the sacraments, to make the Word come alive and change the hearts of those who hear it. He says priests are ambassadors for Christ called to be fathers to a new race of women and men and it's time to be what God has intended — icons of His divine fatherhood.*

Earlier we spoke about a fictional world; a version of reality seen through the eyes of the novelist, P. D. James. Sometimes art can shine more light on the way things really are than a newspaper or history book. And I think that's true of James' *The Children of Men*.

James imagines a future where the voices of children are no longer heard, because children are extinct. She writes of a world that has lost its fertility, its sense of purpose, and therefore its hope in the future. That world is imaginary. But we can see its shadow in some of the habits of our own real world here and now. And the world here and now is the one we've been sent into as priests. Priests are the men Christ intends to bring new life to this world; to preach the Word of life. To be fathers of a new people of God who will be a light to the nations.

I want to briefly sketch for you the picture of an anonymous culture. But everything I'm about to tell you comes from the factual record. This society is advanced in the sciences and the arts. It has a complex economy and a strong military. It includes many different religions, although religion tends to be a private affair or a matter of civic ceremony.

This particular society also has big problems. Among them is that fertility rates remain below replacement levels. There aren't enough children being born to replace the current adult population and to do the work needed to keep society going. The government offers incentives to encourage people to have more babies. But nothing seems to work. Promiscuity is common and accepted. So are bisexuality, and homosexuality. So is prostitution. Birth control and abortion are legal, widely practiced, and justified by society's leading intellectuals. Every now and then, a lawmaker introduces a measure to promote marriage, arguing that the health and future of society depend on stable families. These measures typically go nowhere.

Ok. What society am I talking about? My own country, The United States of course, would broadly fit this description. Yours, Australia, would too. But I'm not talking about us. I've just outlined the conditions of the Mediterranean world at the time of Christ. We tend to idealize the ancients, to look back at Greece and Rome as an age of extraordinary achievements. And of course, it was. But it had another side as well.

We don't usually think of Plato and Aristotle endorsing abortion or infanticide as state policy. But they did. Hippocrates, the great medical pioneer, also famously created an abortion kit that involved sharp blades for cutting up the fetus and a hook for ripping it from the womb. We rarely connect that with his Hippocratic Oath. But some years ago, archeologists discovered the remains of what appeared to be a Roman-era abortion or infanticide "clinic." It was a sewer filled with the bones of more than 100 infants.

If you want some useful winter reading, pick up a little book written about 10 years ago, *The Rise of Christianity* by Rodney Stark. You'll find all of this history and more. Why begin a talk about priestly vocation and mission with an excursus on ancient Rome? Because people often say we're living at a "post-Christian" moment. That's supposed to describe the fact that Western nations have abandoned or greatly downplayed their Christian heritage in recent decades. You have evidence of that in your country. I see it in mine, as well. But our "post-Christian" moment actually looks a great deal like the pre-Christian moment. The signs of our times in the developed nations — morally, intellectually, spiritually and even demographically — are uncomfortably similar to the signs in the world at the time of the Incarnation.

Drawing lessons from history is a subjective business. There's always the risk of oversimplifying. But I do believe that the challenges we face as priests today are very much like those faced by the first Christian priests. And it might help to have a little perspective on how they went about evangelizing their culture. They did such a good job that within 400 years Christianity was the world's dominant religion and the foundation of Western civilization. If we can learn from that history, the more easily God will work through us to spark a new evangelization.

Stark's book addresses a couple of key questions: How did Christianity succeed? How was it able to accomplish so much so fast? He's a social scientist and also a self-described atheist. So he has no interest in God's will or the workings of the Holy Spirit. He focuses only on facts he can verify. Stark concludes that Christian success flowed from two things: Christian doctrine, and people being faithful to that doctrine.

Stark writes: "An essential factor in the religion's success was what Christians believed... And it was the way those doctrines took on actual flesh, the way they directed organizational actions and individual behavior, that led to the rise of Christianity."

Let's put it in less academic terms: The Church, through her bishops and priests, preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ. People believed in the Gospel. But they weren't just agreeing to a set of propositions. Believing in the Gospel meant changing their whole way of thinking and living. It was a radical transformation. So radical they couldn't go on living like the people around them anymore. Stark shows that one of the decisive areas in which Christians rejected the culture around them was marriage and family. From the start, to be a Christian meant believing that sex and marriage were sacred. From the start, to be a Christian meant rejecting abortion, infanticide, birth control, divorce, homosexual activity and marital infidelity — all those things widely practiced by their Roman neighbors.

Athenagoras, a layman, told the Emperor Marcus Aurelius in the year A.D. 176 that abortion was "murder" and that those involved would have to "give an account to God." And he told the emperor the reason why: "For we regard the very fetus in the womb as a created being, and therefore an object of God's care." Christian reverence for the unborn child is no medieval development. It comes from the very beginnings of our faith. The early Church had no debates over politicians and communion. There wasn't any need. No one who tolerated or promoted abortion would have dared to approach the Eucharistic table, let alone dared to call themselves true Christians. And here's why: The early Christians understood that they were the offspring of a new worldwide family of God. They saw the culture around them as a culture of death, a society that was slowly extinguishing itself. In fact, when you read early Christian literature, practices like adultery and abortion are often described as part of "the way of death" or the "way of the black one" — that is, the devil.

There's an interesting line in a Second Century apologetic work written by Minucius Felix. He was a Roman lawyer and a convert. He's talking about a birth-control drug that works as an abortifacient. He describes its effects this way: "There are women who swallow drugs to stifle in their own womb the beginnings" of a person to be.

That's what the first Christians saw around them in their world. They believed the world was snuffing out its own future. It was stifling future generations before they could come to be. It was slowly killing itself. If we see similar signs in our own

day, we need to find the courage those first Christians had in challenging their culture. We need to believe not only what they believed. We need to believe those things with the same deep fervor.

The early Christians staked their lives on the belief that God is our Father. They believed the Church is our mother, as Paul told the Galatians. They believed their bishops and priests were spiritual fathers and that through the sacraments they were made children of God, or "partakers of the divine nature," as Peter said. The first Christians believed these things because their spiritual fathers — their bishops and priests — preached and taught them these things. They taught what Jesus Christ, the Son of God, had heard from his Father and passed on to the apostles. They taught what the Catholic Church is still called to teach until the end of the age.

That's your mission, brothers. To preach the Word of life with power. To incarnate that Word through the sacraments. To make that Word come alive and change the hearts of those who hear it. You're called as Christ's priests to be fathers to a new race of women and men. Second Corinthians tells us that, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." It reminds us that Christ "entrust[ed] to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us" (5:17-21).

It's time for us to reclaim our identity as spiritual fathers of the children of God. We need to know ourselves as God intends us to be known — as his Fathers on earth. We're called to be icons of his divine fatherhood. Do you have the confidence to say to your people what St. Paul said: "I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel"? Do you exhort your people as he did — "like a father [exhorts] his children"?

The first Christians made heroic sacrifices and gave extraordinary witness because they knew that, before the foundation of the world, God had a plan to make them his children. To make them holy. To make them saints. They knew God created each person for a reason. That he had a plan for each of their lives. They knew all these things because their fathers told them so. Are you preaching these things to your people? Are you telling them what Paul told the first Christians: "Be imitators of God, as beloved children"?

Men and women call you "Father." But it needs to be much more than an honorary title. It reflects a spiritual reality. Catherine de Hueck Doherty was one of the most interesting Catholic laywomen of the last century. She was a Russian aristocrat who suffered under the Bolshevik revolution, and nearly starved to death at the hands of the communists. She wrote very moving, firsthand accounts of the

Leninist regime's slaughter of all the priests of Petrograd. And she wrote just as movingly about her own reverence for the Catholic priesthood. She said:

*"We call you 'Father' because you begot us in the mystery of a tremendous love affair between you and God. Because you participate in the one priesthood of Christ. You are wedded to the Church, his bride... We call you 'Father' and we are your 'family.' We need you desperately... to serve us, to feed us with the Eucharist, to heal us with anointing, to reconcile us to God and one another in penance, to witness our unions of love in marriage, to preach God's Word... Teach us how to love. Teach us how to pray. Inflammate our hearts with the desire to wash the feet of our poor brethren, to feed them love, and to preach the gospel with our lives."*

Those words are addressed to you and me. They remind us why God called us to the priesthood. We're here to serve the children of God. To open their hearts to the mystery of God. To keep them from error and harm.

As I said earlier, I've been following your debates here in Australia about stem cell research. We have similar struggles in my country. Though I do need to admit: I've been called a lot of things, but I've never been publicly called a "Boofhead," as one of your Catholic newspapers called Cardinal Pell. I'm not sure what that means. But His Eminence must have made exactly the right people very unhappy. In fact, I believe Cardinal Pell, Archbishop Hickey and others were doing precisely what good priests should be doing. They were being good spiritual fathers. A good father is a teacher. He tries to keep his children from doing evil. He exhorts them to choose the good. He warns them when their lives — or their souls — are in danger.

The reaction of some of your Catholic newspapers reflects the signs of the times we talked about earlier. The temptation for today's Catholics is to try to accommodate an increasingly hostile culture. Some of your newspapers have bit that apple in a big way. I've seen the same appetite in the United States. I noted where one newspaper was angry with the cardinal for allegedly not taking a "pastoral approach to this issue." I read another who made some rather incoherent remarks about the Dark Ages before saying: "These are matters for individual conscience. Churches are there to guide us; they are not meant to be there to tell us."

That's the language of alibis and excuses. These do not seem to be people whose Catholic faith is the driving force in their lives; or at least, that's what their actions say. But they're still your spiritual family. You still need to exhort them as fathers. There's nothing "pastoral" about keeping quiet in the face of evil. It's not

charity to let anyone persist in serious sin, or to help people make excuses. God has entrusted his own children to you. He has given you a share in the authority that his Son alone possessed. I mean it quite literally and with all my heart when I remind you that there is no more important human office than that of the Catholic priest.

One of my favorite Catholic writers is George Bernanos. If you haven't read his novel, *The Diary of a Country Priest*, do it now. Bernanos' country priest describes the dignity of the priesthood in this way: "[God] delivered himself into our hands — body and soul — God's body, God's soul, God's honor, into our priestly hands."

The living God has delivered himself into your priestly hands. To your hands he has entrusted his honor and his plans for the human family. You alone can make Christ's body and blood present in the Eucharist. You alone can forgive sins with his voice in the confessional.

The Cure d' Ars, St. John Vianney, used to say that if he met a priest and an angel, he would salute the priest before the angel. Why? Because, the angel is the friend of God, but the priest stands in his place.

In one of her visions, Christ told St. Catherine of Siena something similar: "[Priests] are my anointed ones and I call them my Christs, because I have given them the office of administering me to you... The angel himself has no such dignity, for I have just given it to those men whom I have appointed as earthly angels in this life."

Some of you may not be comfortable listening to my thoughts right now. I can understand why. A lot of us here came of age at a time of change and confusion in the Church. Some of us may still have the scars. I don't plan to revisit any of those debates. Nor do I diminish for a moment the gravity of the sins committed by some priests over the past few decades, and the suffering those sins caused. But our sins and failures as priests speak only to our own unworthiness. They take nothing away from the greatness of the vocation to which God called you. He called you by name. He knows your heart. And he loves you.

The Church belongs to Christ. Our priesthood is his priesthood. No one else is given the mission we have. As Pope Benedict XVI has said, priests are Christ's "living instruments." We were ordained to be "the voice and the hands of Christ in the world." Brothers, we need to help each other be faithful in the little things of our priestly lives. Especially in our prayer and devotion, in our celebration of the sacraments and our preaching of the Word. The great Jesuit Father Walter Ciszek,

who spent 23 years in Soviet prison camps, reminded us that there are no insignificant acts in the mystery of divine providence.

*"We are not saved by doing our own will, but the will of the Father," he said. "We do that, not by interpreting it or reducing it to mean what we would like it to mean, but by accepting it in its fullness, as made manifest to us by the situations and circumstances and persons his providence sends us. Each day, and every minute of every day, is given to us by God with that in mind. We, for our part, can accept and offer back to God every prayer, work and suffering of the day — no matter how insignificant or unspectacular they may seem to us."*

Ciszek knew more about the loneliness and suffering of the priest's ministry than we will ever imagine. We toil in the vineyard sowing seeds of faith that will only bear fruit generations after we've gone. But there are no bit players in salvation history. We will only know the good we've done when we stand before our Father at the end of our days.

One last question before I leave you: How many of you know who Mother Teresa was? It's a trick question. Everyone knows her. But how many of you know the name of her parish priest when she was a child? What's my point? Mother Teresa didn't become Mother Teresa by herself. She had a spiritual father. Someone who preached the Word of God to her. Someone who fed her at the table of the Lord. Someone who heard her confession and gave her direction. Did he know he was helping to form the soul of one of our age's great witnesses to Christ? He couldn't have. But it wouldn't have made any difference. His mission would've been the same. He was doing what he was supposed to do. What God called him to do.

That's your mission, too, brothers. To help God make saints. Maybe not one of the handful of men and women canonized by the Church. But ordinary, everyday saints. By the way, Mother Teresa's priest growing up was a Jesuit named Franjo Jambrenkovic. Though the world won't remember his name, she never forgot him. The world needs more Mother Teresa's. And for that, the world needs more Father Jambrenkovics. In other words, it needs you.

I began this talk by noting that our world looks a lot like the world did before the Incarnation. And the world is still waiting for the children of God to fulfill the promise of the Incarnation. Today, we who profess to be Christians are called to do what Rodney Stark said the first Christians did. We need to make the teachings of Christ take flesh in our lives. We need to live what we say we believe. We need to live as

children of God, holding fast to the Word of life in a troubled and confused generation. Only a new generation of God's children can make the waters of life flow once more in this barren world. But God has not left this world desolate. He has left us his priests. And that means you. That's why you were born. That's why you're here.