

THINGS WORTH DYING FOR:
The Nature of a Life Worth Living

+Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.
 University of Notre Dame
 10.11.19

I want to thank Dr. Muñoz, Father Jenkins, and the Napa Institute Forum for welcoming me to Notre Dame today – and you, for being here. The fact that anyone would turn out for a talk with the word “dying” in the title, especially on the eve of an SC game, proves that miracles still happen.

I turned 75 a couple of weeks ago and, as Canon Law requires, I offered my resignation to Pope Francis. In the next few months the Holy Father will accept it, and Philadelphia will have a new archbishop.

Philadelphia is a great city, and it’s been one of the great privileges in my life to serve as the pastor of its Catholic people and clergy. So my feelings are understandably mixed. The good news about turning 75 -- the *very* good news -- is that I’ll finally be able to retire. The not so good news is what sooner or later comes after it. When you get to be my age, a topic like “things worth dying for” has some special urgency. As one of my Domer friends likes to point out, dying is a downer.

Or that’s one way of looking at it. My own feelings are rather different. My dad was a mortician in a small Kansas town. So in my family, death and all of the complex emotions that surround it, were a natural part of living. To put it another way: The meaning of a sentence becomes clear when we put a period at the end of it. The same applies to life. When we talk about things worth dying for, we’re really talking about the things worth living for; the things that give life meaning. Thinking a little about our mortality puts the world in perspective. It helps us see what matters, and also the foolishness of grasping at things that finally *don’t* matter. Your hearse, as my father might say, won’t have a luggage rack.

Socrates is often seen as the founder of the Western ethical tradition, and he said that his philosophizing was best understood as a preparation for dying. It sounds like an odd claim, but it makes perfect sense. He had a passion for truth-telling; the wisdom that comes from it; and the life of integrity and moral character that results. The very word, “philosophy,” captures the spirit of his love for truth. It combines *philia*, the love of friendship, with *sophia*, which means wisdom. Socrates didn’t “study” wisdom. He pursued it as the goal and framework of his life. He *loved* it.

Love is demanding. It draws us outside ourselves. The greater the love, the greater our willingness to sacrifice. So when we know, honestly, what we’re willing to sacrifice for,

even to die for, we're able to see the true nature of our loves. And that will tell us who we really are.

Here's an example. Families, at their best, are an exercise in self-denial for those we love. Mothers and fathers make huge sacrifices to protect their children. Jordan and Andre Anchondo used their own bodies to shield their infant son from the gunfire in an El Paso Walmart last summer. They knew what they were willing to die for. In a real sense, even with the advantages of modern medicine, every woman who bears a child puts her life on the line. And raising children *always* requires sacrifices from parents, sacrifices of time, attention, and family resources.

Instinct obviously plays a big role in the bond between parent and child. When looked at from the outside, this can make the sacrifices in a family seem "easy," because for most people they come naturally. But as religious belief recedes, and communities of faith decline, the individualism at the heart of the American experiment becomes more selfish, more belligerent, and more corrosive. It breaks down family bonds. It tempts parents to treat their children as accomplishments, or as ornaments, or – even worse – as burdens. It also weakens the ties between grown children and their parents, who as they age can often become dependent. It's a useful experiment for some of you who are here today as students to consider what you'd *really* be willing to give up for the sake of caring long term for a mother or father.

Here's another example. Friendship is generally a milder form of love than family, and the notion of dying for a friend might seem remote. But Someone rather famous once said that "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13). History is full of stories of soldiers who put themselves in harm's way to save their comrades. And all true friendship requires a readiness to die, if not literally, then in the sense of dying to ourselves; dying to our impatience and our reluctance to make sacrifices for others. Pope Francis often talks about accompaniment as a key to Christian discipleship. The willingness to be with our friends when they're not easily loveable, to accompany them in their neediness or to share in their suffering -- this is the test of true friendship.

Here's a third example: the love of honor. The legends and myths of antiquity often hinge on the love of personal honor. In *The Iliad*, Achilles withdraws from the Greek army because its leader, Agamemnon, has offended his honor. For centuries men dueled to defend their honor. Women fought in their own ways to prevent their honor from being violated. The love of honor is something many have been willing to die for.

"Honor" is a word that can seem theatrical or outdated to the modern ear. But that misses the inner substance of the concept. Honor in a traditional society is profoundly important and similar to the idea of dignity or integrity in our own era. When a man stays faithful to his wife, he honors his wedding vow and maintains the integrity of his marriage. The same goes for our deepest convictions. They also need to be honored. We all have a hunger – even when we fail at it -- to live with integrity as honorable people; people of principle willing to speak up for what we know to be right and true.

The novels of Alexander Solzhenitsyn brim with characters who struggle to live honorably in the toxic atmosphere of the Soviet Union. A survivor of the gulag himself, his work echoes with a disgust for cowards and flunkies, and a reverence for persons who seek to live with integrity, honoring their consciences even when it might mean dying. The settings for his novels are bleak. Today, the big murder regimes of the last century are just a memory. But Solzhenitsyn's themes are still very useful. As St. Paul warns us, the principalities and powers of this world always seek to control our lives. Evil is real, even when it's masked in pleasant forms and excellent marketing. Therefore, it's always important to honor our deepest convictions. And doing so can be costly.

We're living in a moment of vigilant, even vindictive, political correctness on matters ranging from sex to the meaning of our national history. It can be very hard for a young scholar to get a job at many American universities if he thinks marriage is only possible between a man and a woman -- and he makes the mistake of talking about it. People working in corporate settings tend to learn very quickly that "diversity training" is not an invitation to free and open discussion. It's often the opposite. And our politics often seems gripped with amnesia about the price in human suffering extracted by the bitter social experiments of the last century -- always in the name of progress and equality.

Obviously the courage of our convictions needs to be guided by prudence. In the early years of Christianity the faithful suffered waves of persecution. The Fathers of the Church criticized those who were too eager for martyrdom. The account of the martyrdom of Polycarp tells us that, at the urging of friends, he withdrew from his city in order to avoid confronting civic leaders who required Christians to offer sacrifices to the pagan gods. Polycarp's discretion is contrasted with another man who was eager to defy the city's authorities, wanting to make a show of his faith. Polycarp is held up as the proper model of faith, not the rash man.

Life -- *all* life, no matter how poor, infirm, unborn, or limited -- is a great gift. We should never be in a hurry to foolishly risk it. The same can be said for professional success, or even just the good of earning a decent living and providing for a family. Silence and avoiding situations that force us to state our convictions can sometimes be the prudent course of action.

The key word in that sentence is "sometimes." Cowardice is very good at hiding behind a number of virtues. Too often we censor or contort ourselves to fit into what we perceive as approved behavior or thought. We muffle our Christian beliefs to avoid being the targets of contempt. Over time, a legitimate exercise of prudence can very easily become a degrading habit; a habit that soils the soul. No woman of integrity betrays her convictions. Mouthing lies we do not believe kills us inwardly. Even silence, which is sometimes prudent, can poison our integrity if it becomes a long-term policy. Jesus urges us to love our neighbor as ourselves. The self-love proper for a Christian includes the love of personal honor, the kind that comes from living with integrity in a world that would have us betray our convictions.

Family, friends, honor, and integrity: These are natural loves. Throughout history, men and women have been willing to die for these loves. As Christians, though, we claim to be animated – first and foremost -- by a *supernatural* love; love for God as our Creator and Jesus Christ as his Son. St. Polycarp, for all his caution and prudence, eventually *did* choose martyrdom rather than repudiate his Christian faith.

The issue at hand is this: Are we really willing to do the same; and if so, how must we live in a way that proves it? These aren't theoretical questions. They're brutally real. Right now Christians in many countries around the world are facing the choice of Jesus Christ or death. Last year the German novelist Martin Mosebach published an account of the 21 migrant workers in Libya who were kidnapped by Muslim extremists and executed for their faith. Twenty were Coptic Christians from Egypt. One was another African who refused to separate himself from his brothers in the faith.

The murder of those 21 Christians is captured on video. It's hard to watch -- not just because the act is barbaric, but also because, in our hearts, we fear that, faced with the same choice, we might betray our faith in order to save our lives. Put frankly, the martyrs, both ancient and modern, frighten us as much as they inspire us. And maybe this reaction makes perfect sense. Maybe it's a version of the biblical principle that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Fear of martyrdom is the beginning of an honest appraisal of our spiritual mediocrity.

So I think we should consider this fear for a moment, rather than repressing it, as we so often do.

The Christian men beheaded on the Libyan beach are not really so remote from us. The worry we naturally feel, that we might fail a similar test, is a concrete and urgent version of the anxiety we rightly feel when we think about coming before the judgment of God. If we're honest about ourselves, we know that we're likely to fail that test too. After all, we're barely able to live up to the basic demands of the Ten Commandments. Many of us have trouble following even the minimal norms of a Catholic life: regular confession and Mass attendance, kindness to others, and a few minutes of daily prayer. If those very simple things are struggles, how can we possibly have the spiritual strength to face martyrdom? Or the judgment of a just God?

The Catholic faith we hold doesn't deny our failures. It highlights them to help us see that our hope is not in the strength of our own love, but rather in the power of God's love. As St. Paul says in one of the most moving passages of Scripture, "I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor power, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39).

All of us here today, in all of our strengths and all of our weaknesses, are powerless to defeat God's purpose in Jesus Christ. Our flaws, our mistakes and inadequacies, our spiritual mediocrity, and our self-sabotage are impotent in the face of God's love. For this reason, the martyrs do not bear witness to the spiritual athleticism of remarkable men

and women. Instead, they point to the relentless love of God in Jesus Christ. As the Preface for Holy Martyrs reads:

*For you [God] are glorified when your saints are praised;
their very sufferings are but wonders of your might:
In your mercy you give ardor to their faith,
to their endurance you grant firm resolve,
and in their struggle the victory is yours,
through Christ our Lord.*

What that means is this: Those who are faithful to God will in turn have his faithfulness at life's ending, no matter how extreme the test.

Grace illuminates nature. The supernatural love of God in Jesus Christ that gives courage to the martyrs helps us better understand the natural loves of family, friends, honor, and integrity. The power of these loves -- a power that can be so great that we're willing to live and die to remain true to them -- does not come from within the self. The mother does not conjure a love for her child out of her inner emotional resources. The same holds true for friends, honor, and integrity. Love's power draws us out of ourselves. It comes from what is loved, not the one who loves. Created in the image of God, the unborn child is *worthy* of a mother's love. It's the worthiness of what we love, its *lovability*, that enables us to sacrifice wealth, worldly success, and even our lives.

We in the so-called "developed" nations live in an era of unprecedented wealth. For many of us, the entire globe is open to travel. To a degree unimaginable in earlier generations, many of us can choose our own path in life or even reinvent our identity. We float in a fluid world of limitless choice. This can seem like a blessing, but it often turns out to be a curse. That's because only a weightless person can float.

The most fundamental feature of our era is that it weakens bonds, curves us in upon ourselves, and seduces us to live without love. We hear that "love wins" and "hate has no home here," but so often these words are merely slogans in a culture war filled with more bitterness than honesty. We're promised celebrity on social media, novel experiences in our products, technologies, and travel, and wealth in professional success. But we're not really encouraged to love. Authentic love is ordered to truth; the truth about human beings, human nature, and Creation. It's demanding and self-denying. It anchors us to realities that are deeply human, deeply rewarding, and the deepest sources of joy -- but also inconvenient, and easily seen as burdens.

It's a good thing, a vital thing, to consider what we're willing to die for. *What do we love more than life?* To even ask that question is an act of rebellion against a loveless age. And to answer it with conviction is to become a revolutionary; the kind of loving revolutionary who will survive and resist -- and someday redeem a late modern West that can no longer imagine *anything* worth dying for, and thus, in the long run, anything worth living for.

I'll close with just a couple of personal thoughts.

St. Paul tells us that "God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control. Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord . . . but share in suffering for the Gospel in the power of God" (2 Tim 1:6-8).

I mention this because believers can expect a rough road in the years ahead on a whole range of issues. There can be no concordat between the Christian understanding of human dignity and sexuality, and the contempt directed at our beliefs by important elements of our culture.

This is why Respect Life Week on this campus, which took place just last week, is so important each year. It's why the dedication of the students who support it, is such a source of hope. Their witness is impressive and life-affirming. It's true to the spirit of the Gospel. It's Notre Dame at its Catholic finest -- and I salute them.

I've been reading a lot of Tolkien lately. Notre Dame's motto – *Vita, Dulcedo, Spes*; life, sweetness, hope – would have resonated deeply with Tolkien because of his lifelong devotion to Mary. In fact, the drama of the Christian story informed everything Tolkien wrote. The intensity of his Catholic faith shaped his entire life and genius.

Near the end of *The Two Towers*, the second volume of Tolkien's *Ring* trilogy, Samwise Gamgee says, "the great tales never end, do they, Mr. Frodo?" And Frodo answers, "No they never end as tales, but the people in them come, and go as their part's ended."

This is very likely my last talk as a serving archbishop. So my part in the tale is ending, and I can think of few better places to conclude it. But the Church, her mission, and the Christian story go on. And the greatest blessing I can wish, for each of you, is that you take up your part in the tale with all the energy and passion in your heart. Because it's a life worth living.

God bless you.

+Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap., is the archbishop of Philadelphia. This lecture was delivered for the [Constitutional Studies Program](#) at the University of Notre Dame.