



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on July 5, 2012

Archbishop Tells “Caesar” Our Rights Are the Gift of God

“Render unto Caesar” is something we often hear quoted at tax time, but Rev. Charles Caput, the Catholic Archbishop of Philadelphia, found this Fourth of July a fitting time to remind “Caesar” that the “unalienable rights” proclaimed in our Declaration of Independence come from God and do not belong to any ruler — monarch, emperor, or Democrat. At the conclusion of the “Fortnight for Freedom” called by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Bishop Chaput [preached](#) to the overflow crowd of some 4,500 at a noon Mass at the Basilica Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. He used as his text the account in Saint Matthew’s Gospel of Jesus confronted with the question of whether it is lawful in the eyes of God to pay tribute (in the form of taxes) to Caesar. After asking whose image (Caesar’s) was on the coin of tribute, Jesus said: “Render, therefore, unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” (Matthew 22:21)



While citing the obligations of charity and justice while in the world, the archbishop insisted that the lives and liberties of people do not belong to the world or any of its governments. “Because just as the coin bears the stamp of Caesar’s image, we bear the stamp of God’s image in baptism. We belong to God, and only to God.”

The “Fortnight for Freedom,” the two weeks ending on July 4, was called by the bishops to protest the regulation announced by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that limits the religious conscience exemption from employers’ obligations under the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act to houses of worship and not religious-affiliated institutions such as schools, hospitals, and charitable organizations, that employ people of different faiths. The bishops have objected that the requirement to provide health insurance that includes coverage for contraception products and services and for abortion-inducing pills would violate the religious freedom of Catholic and other institutions governed by religious doctrines that forbid abortion and artificial birth control. Mandating that coverage is a violation of religious freedom, the bishops have declared numerous times since the regulation was announced, but especially during the past two weeks. The government, they have said, has no business deciding which employers or institutions are sufficiently religious to have their freedom of religion protected by the exemption.

Freedom of religion is the first of the rights enumerated in the U.S. Constitution’s Bill of Rights, and Archbishop Chaput declared that true freedom is following the laws of God and not dictates of



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government that require men and organizations to violate God's laws as well as their own consciences. It was no coincidence that the bishops chose to begin the campaign on June 28, the date when the Church annually honors the memory of Bishop John Fisher and Thomas More, two saints and martyrs who were executed in 1535 for refusing to sign an oath declaring the British monarch as head of the church in England.

"The purpose of religious liberty is to create the context for true freedom," said the archbishop, who is author of a book titled [Render Unto Caesar: Serving Our Nation By Living Our Catholic Beliefs in Political Life](#). "Religious liberty is a foundational right. It's necessary for a good society. But it can never be sufficient for human happiness. It's not an end in itself. In the end, we defend religious liberty in order to live the deeper freedom that is discipleship in Jesus Christ."

The bishops' campaign appears unaffected by last week's Supreme Court decision upholding the constitutionality of the Affordable Care Act against the challenge that Congress had exceeded its powers by requiring uninsured persons to purchase health insurance. It struck down as a violation of "dual sovereignty" the portion of the statute that requires states to either accept an expanded version of the Medicaid program for low-income people or lose all of their Medicaid funding. Within hours of the ruling, the bishops, who frequently cite their decades-long support for a national health care program, issued a statement emphasizing that they have not called for the law's repeal.

"The decision of the Supreme Court neither diminishes the moral imperative to ensure decent health care for all, nor eliminates the need to correct (the law's) fundamental flaws," the bishops declared.

Nonetheless, some commentators described the "Fortnight" campaign as an invasion by the bishops into the field of partisan politics. Melinda Henneberger of the *Washington Post's* "She the People" column, labeled the campaign the "Fortnight to Defeat Barack Obama." David Gibson, author of books on the American Catholic laity and an analyst for Religion News Service, described the two-week campaign as "an effort to kind of rally the troops to recreate this unified Catholic community that's really disappeared in the last 50 years." Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz of Lincoln, Nebraska, argued, however, that the effort is a moral imperative, regardless of how it is received by the laity of the populace at large. Church doctrines, he said in an interview on National Public Radio, "are not open to votes. These are what God has revealed, and the custody of that revelation is, of course, in the possession of the Church."

Considering the fundamental nature of the issues they have declared at stake in this conflict, the bishops seem unlikely to turn back from it. The battle, Archbishop Chaput declared in Wednesday's homily, is for the "sacredness of life and the dignity of the human person — in other words, for the truth of what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God."

Photo: Archbishop of Philadelphia Charles Chaput speaks during a news conference, May 4, 2012, in Philadelphia: AP Images



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