This article, which inaugurated SCSS president Stephen M. Krason’s monthly (sometimes bi-monthly) online column, “Neither Left Nor Right but Catholic” (in September 2010), takes note of an important address given by Archbishop Charles Chaput in Europe in which he foresees increasing repression by an arch-secularist political and cultural elite against Catholics and the Church when they try to bring the Church’s message to society. This represents a deeply disturbing narrowing of the meaning of religious liberty to mere freedom of worship.

Neither Left nor Right, but Catholic

Responding to the New Aggressive Anti-Catholicism

Stephen M. Krason

On August 28, Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput, a long-time member of the bishops’ advisory board of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists, gave a noteworthy address in Slovakia. His focus was the increasingly evident anti-Christian and, specifically, anti-Catholic posture of the ruling classes (politicians, judges, and bureaucrats) and the cultural elite in Europe and the U.S. He discusses the twin realities of an “aggressively secular political vision” and a “consumerist economic model” that is spawning “a new kind of state-encouraged atheism.” Both Europe and America are “building a society apart from God.” Most insidious in this is an “emerging systematic discrimination against the Church” that aims to try to stop her from carrying out her mission in society. Crucial to this development, he tells us, is subtle redefinition that has taken hold of freedom of religion, observed in the rhetoric of President Obama and others. It has been reduced to mere freedom of worship. People may privately believe what they want, but individual Christians and the Church can be expected to face a range of persecutions if they try to bring their beliefs to bear on questions of morality in politics and the culture.

Chaput made other striking points. He said that our era’s rampant relativism is leading more and more to exploitation—the strong overwhelming the weak, as on a range of human life issues—and how its concomitant perspective that the state is the sole source of rights has led to an arbitrariness that signals that “even a democracy can become totalitarian.” The secular culture’s chief virtues of “tolerance” and “diversity” mean that truth the Church proclaims cannot be tolerated, so she and her adherents must be repressed. This, of course, distinctly echoes Pope Benedict XVI’s raising the specter of a “dictatorship of
relativism” and Pope John Paul II’s insisting that democratic republics that ignore basic human rights like the right to life are easily transformed into a “thinly disguised totalitarianism.”

Chaput also said that the frequent attempt by political elites to deny the historical understanding of the role of religion in the West—one readily thinks of the glaring omission of Christianity when stating Europe’s cultural heritage in the proposed EU constitution some years ago—is a ploy to make it easier to manipulate people. Indeed, these elites are well aware of the point John Agresto made in my edited volume, *The Recovery of American Education*: “Every civilization is one generation deep. If the heritage of the past is not transmitted and retained, it is lost.” This is what they are aiming for and reveling in the possibility of.

Chaput cautioned Christians not to attempt a rapprochement with Caesar, if it means compromising their essential beliefs in the least. This is a common temptation. Rather, we must “fight the evils we see”—even to the point of suffering. In saying this, I don’t believe that Chaput calls for Christians to have a martyr complex, but to be prepared for persecution—even in the advanced, sophisticated, purportedly human rights-conscious nations of the West. As I said in my recent book, *The Public Order and the Sacred Order*, about America, Chaput says about the entire Western world: The Church is the crucial element for its renewal. It could not be otherwise, since Christ chose it to carry on His salvific mission.

What Chaput calls for, of course, is courage—but, even more than that, a spirit of resistance. This is something that individual Catholics must heed, in things as small as speaking up about the Church’s teachings to their non-Catholic friends. Increasingly, it will concern bigger things. With every attempt at trying to limit their public witness, Christians must be prepared for a dramatic—although entirely legal—response. Like their French co-religionists under Cardinal Lustiger twenty-six years ago, American Catholics must be ready to take to the streets in mass protests. It is also a challenge to Chaput’s fellow U.S. prelates and the Church’s institutions. If the USCCB, *as a body*, unflinchingly faced down the IRS when threatening the Church’s tax exemption, the bureaucrats would beat the hastiest retreat ever seen. All Catholic institutions should emulate Belmont Abbey College’s taking up the legal fight against such schemes as forced contraceptive coverage in its health insurance. The bishops can no longer be weighed down by the opprobrium of the sex abuse scandal or traditional Catholic reluctance to act against the American cultural drift. While many things must still be done to get the U.S. Church’s own house in order, they must realize that the best defense is a good offense.