

George Weigel on a Crisis of Liberty

Biographer Speaks on Social Teaching, John Paul II's Legacy

By Ann Schneible

ROME, DEC. 23, 2011 (Zenit.org).- At a time when the debate over the true nature of human freedom is rife with controversy and emotion, Catholics must seek to restore society to an understanding of what it means to be truly free.

It was on this theme of freedom that George Weigel, friend and renowned biographer of Blessed John Paul II, spoke earlier this month at a conference in Rome on "Blessed John Paul II and the Crisis of Liberty."

ZENIT talked to Weigel about freedom and Catholic social teaching, and its application to today's social and political concerns.

ZENIT: Catholic social thought can seem abstract to the average Catholic. In what ways can the person in the pew apply it? Or is it not applicable to everyday life?

Weigel: Catholics in everyday life can honor the dignity of every human being; Catholics in everyday life can live in service to the common good; Catholics in everyday life can help build and sustain the institutions of civil society, like the family, a free press, free business and labor associations, and the Church; Catholics in everyday life can live in solidarity with others -- which means that Catholics in everyday life can live the four bedrock principles of Catholic social doctrine.

ZENIT: In regards to those in public office and those who influence policy, what do you think are the most urgent areas where it needs to be implemented, and how can it be used most effectively?

Weigel: The defense of human dignity against the rise of utilitarian criteria for measuring human worth, the defense of religious freedom in full, and the defense of civil society institutions like marriage are the three priority issues in the public policy arena in the West today. Engaged Catholics should hold their public officials accountable for their actions on these questions.

ZENIT: What has Pope Benedict XVI added to John Paul II's legacy of social thought?

Weigel: He's further cemented the life issues into the foundations of Catholic public policy advocacy according to the social doctrine, and he's strengthened the idea of a "human ecology" that must be attended to in any society that aspires to freedom.

ZENIT: At this time, Americans are being faced with new challenges to religious freedom. In light of Church documents such as *Gaudium Et Spes* and the social teachings of John Paul II, what can American Catholics do to address these growing threats to religious freedom, in particular during this upcoming election year?

Weigel: As noted above, we can hold Catholic public officials, and indeed all public officials, to account for whether they serve the common good by defending life, religious freedom, and civil society institutions like marriage. And if they don't we should vote them out.