Opinion
Editorial



Pope Francis greets Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, during a private meeting Oct. 9 at the Vatican. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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It was an odd statement that Cardinal Daniel DiNardo released following Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy's resignation as a consultant to the U.S. bishops' Committee on Doctrine after Weinandy made public a letter criticizing Pope Francis for creating "chronic confusion" among faithful Catholics.

One would have expected from a cardinal and the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops a clear rebuke of Weinandy and a robust defense of Francis. That is not what we got.

Almost the whole statement was a reflection, in DiNardo's words, "on the nature of dialogue within the Church." He wrote: "We all must acknowledge that legitimate differences exist, and that it is the work of the Church, the entire body of Christ, to work towards an ever-growing understanding of God's truth." DiNardo is clearly defending Weinandy's felt need to correct the pope.

We cannot but ask where DiNardo's plea for dialogue and understanding was when Weinandy, as head of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat of Doctrine and Canonical Affairs, was building cases against theologians like St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson and Fr. Peter Phan and against the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Where was the "Christian charity" then? To paraphrase the quote DiNardo used from St. Ignatius of Loyola, where was the presumption of the Christian neighbor's good intent?

Weinandy was, in fact, following the directions of the bishops who hired him. What a twist of fate that Weinandy, whose tenure as doctrinal chief has been described by theologians as antagonistic and marked by "prosecutorial zeal," is now among the dissenters. He is finding the outside an uncomfortable place to be.

Of course, Weinandy was only replicating at the U.S. bishops' conference what was going on in Vatican offices, not the least at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in corralling theologians and keeping bishops in lockstep with Rome. The stories of Vatican investigations of theologians like Jesuit Fr. Jacques Dupuis and Sri Lankan Oblate Fr. Tissa Balasuriya have been well-documented in NCR, as have the stories of Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen of Seattle and Bishop William Morris of Toowoomba, Australia, both bishops beloved by the people in their diocese but feared by the Curia. Francis has largely stopped these kinds of investigations.

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NCR will be among the last to find fault with a Catholic who wants to criticize the actions or inactions of a pope or who has sincere questions about church teaching. We, in fact, would defend a person who seeks true dialogue and engagement. That is the way, in DiNardo's words, "to work towards an ever-growing understanding of God's truth."

We will, however, find fault with a person who pleads for understanding and dialogue when he never offered that to others. We will also question a person who is less than genuine with that criticism.

We have seen a lot of criticism of Francis recently. Weinandy is the latest, but in September a small group of theologians and pastors issued a "filial correction" to Francis. Before them were the so-called four *dubia* cardinals, who have repeatedly asked Francis to clarify teaching in his 2016 apostolic exhortation on family and marriage, *Amoris Laetitia,* parts of which they claim are not in accord with the constant teaching and practice of the church.

One of those cardinals, Raymond Burke, has granted numerous media interviews saying he plans to issue a fraternal correction of the pope if the Holy Father refuses to respond to the *dubia*. They all say similar things to what Burke recently told the National Catholic Register, that those questioning Francis do so for the good of the church, the papacy and the individual souls of the faithful.

All this "weighs very heavily on my heart," Burke told the Register, adding that he has seen "a great deal of confusion, also people feeling that the Church is not a secure point of reference."

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If any Catholics are feeling confused, it is not because of Francis; it is because of Burke and Weinandy and their ilk. They sow the confusion they condemn. They claim they want dialogue, but they don't. They want to be in charge and they are not.

People in that corner of the Catholic community have, for the last 25 years, sought a "purer church." They have said that if the church has to be smaller to be authentic, let it be smaller. They have been the keepers of the narrow gate. They resent that Francis is throwing open doors and trying to knock down walls. They have presided

over the diminishment of the church, and they can't stand that Francis wants all people in the loving embrace of the church.

Francis is the most popular pope in living memory, probably in history, and that galls them. Those who write *dubia* and filial corrections are tiny in number, and largely confined to the English-speaking church. Regrettably, they are well-represented in the clergy and powerful Catholic institutions in the United States. DiNardo could have issued a filial correction to this group, but he didn't.

DiNardo's pledge of loyalty came late in an otherwise mushy and meandering statement that did little to clarify the U.S. bishops' position on the matter of Weinandy's foolishness. DiNardo could have made a decisive statement and put the U.S. church firmly behind Francis, but he didn't.

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What DiNardo didn't say points to the wider leadership problem in the U.S. church. We are at a time of massive social upheaval on many levels. The daily news is filled with tales of gun violence and a pervasive culture of sexual violence running through many of our institutions. People are losing confidence in the democratic foundations upon which our society was built. People are afraid that if they lose their jobs they won't find new work, that they can't give their children adequate educations, that if anyone in the family falls sick they won't be able to afford health care.

Many of these are public policy issues that involve civic solutions, but underlying them all are questions about humanity and spirituality, questions about faith and hope. On these underlying questions, we look to our bishops not for answers, but for guidance, and we find them lacking. We look to them for accompaniment on this journey and we find them absent.

Francis, on the other hand, talks about how the greatest tragedy of today is a "spiritual sclerosis" and "sclerosis of the heart." He understands the general anxiety of our times and can, as a pastor, talk about it. He offers to walk with us. Catholics — and many non-Catholics — are not confused by this, they are captivated by it. That is what DiNardo didn't say but should have.

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