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'These newly impassioned bishops'

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

Sometimes you have to pay attention to what's missing, what's not said.

In two recent commentaries about American Catholic bishops – one by Lisa Miller of *Newsweek* and one by John L. Allen Jr. of *NCR* – I enjoyed the helpful insights both brought to the subject but was more struck by what neither of them mentioned.

Miller and Allen focused on the power these bishops exercise, particularly in some of the political circles that have been active in the health care reform debate. But neither writer spoke of a characteristic of religious leadership that is high on my required list as a Protestant – being pastoral.

Miller, for instance, quoted Princeton scholar Robert George, whom she described as “the reigning conservative Catholic intellectual.” These bishops, George said, are “of a much bolder stripe, and much more willing to enter the fray and take the punches and the counterpunches.”

And Allen, describing Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver, said this: “Usually seen as a strong conservative, Chaput can be polarizing because he takes clear positions and defends them with relish. He’s consequential in somewhat the same way as politicians and pundits with bold views and the nerve not to pull their rhetorical punches: Love ‘em or hate ‘em, they’re hard to ignore.”

In neither case do these descriptions make me want to go to the bishops in question for religious guidance.

What does it mean to be pastoral? Well, let me disabuse you of the notion that it means having a wishy-washy theology or an inability to exercise a prophetic voice in one-on-one situations. Indeed, the most pastoral religious leaders I’ve known have spent a lot of time understanding theology and the requirement of that theology to speak clearly on moral and ethical issues, both personal and social in nature.

But being pastoral also means being approachable. And it means having an empathetic heart and a willingness to acknowledge the reality that because life is extraordinarily messy, one's responses to it cannot be prepackaged.

It also requires an ability to embody the sad truth that all — including Catholic bishops and executive presbyters — fall short of the glory of God and need forgiveness.

I wish I believed that being pastoral was at the top of the list for the people Lisa Miller described as "these newly impassioned bishops." But it sounds as if political skills for them trump pastoral skills.

That makes me wonder whether such bishops are helping parish priests acquire and use pastoral skills that are essential when members of their churches come to talk about marital infidelity or a son who has just come out of the closet or the abortion a daughter just had.

There is a time to state the rules clearly, to offer the church's teachings, to admonish. But when a parishioner is in pain and stumbling about in confusion, what he or she needs most is someone who is pastoral, someone whose heart is soft enough to absorb that pain without lecturing the person experiencing it.

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Some years ago when I served on a committee that oversees Presbyterian seminary students, I got into a bit of an argument with a pastor about baptizing still-born babies. Our polity and theology say such baptisms are not necessary. And I was having trouble understanding why this particular pastor wouldn't put his foot down and say he'd never do it.

Oh, he said, he'd tell the parents that the church doesn't believe baptism in such a case is required. And he'd steer them away from it. But if they were in such pain that they couldn't grasp the nuances of this argument and insisted on baptism, he'd give in and baptize their dead baby as a pastoral act.

Ah, yes, I said. I finally see. It's like Jesus said: Man wasn't made for the Sabbath but the Sabbath for man. Do these "these newly impassioned bishops" see that? It's worth asking.

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