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Editorial: Competing claims on a bishop's energies

by NCR Editorial Staff

Editorial

Bishop Robert F. Vasa is heading to Santa Rosa, Calif., leaving the Catholics of Baker, Ore., after 11 years as bishop there. Last month he wrote a parting letter to the members of his diocese, a kind of plaintive lament. Filled with self-pardoning sentiment, it is a valuable document as it comes from a church leader known for his rigid interpretations of Catholic belief and practice and a quick-to-punish approach.

In the letter, Vasa admits that during his years as head of the Baker diocese, "some have found me too difficult," and he prays "that no one has been given true cause to abandon Christ because of me."

"I am sure I have not been all that you hoped I could be for you and I ask that you pray that I do better in the future. Please do not judge me too harshly."

We suspect that not many who have experienced his rule will spend much time judging him, since they will now have as apostolic administrator Bishop William S. Skylstad, the retired bishop of Spokane, Ore., to whom the description "pastoral" has been applied throughout his career. That word has become Catholic code for saying that a leader possesses a basic human empathy and compassion. It signifies one who understands that at the most essential level his role, as Pope John XXIII once said, is to make the human sojourn on Earth less sad.

Vasa's plea requesting lenient judgment is interesting coming from a man whose path to episcopacy included the event that first placed him in the national spotlight -- an extraordinarily broad decree of excommunication. In 1996, as vicar general of the Lincoln, Neb., diocese and general secretary of the diocesan synod, he pronounced excommunicated members of Planned Parenthood, the Society of St. Pius X, the Hemlock Society, the St. Michael the Archangel Chapel, Freemasons, Job's Daughters, DeMolay,

Eastern Star, Call to Action, Catholics for a Free Choice, and even the local chapter of the Rainbow Girls.

He was undoubtedly fulfilling the wishes of his bishop at the time, Fabian Bruskewitz, an extremist among even the most conservative of his peers. The year the excommunications were announced, several other bishops were members of Call to Action. Vasa was reared, as it were, in an episcopal environment that viewed itself superior to all else, casting judgments about the landscape as in another age a prince might do through his vassals.

In his life as a bishop, Vasa has mimicked his mentor, declaring who is and is not Catholic, and sparing no one his displeasure. He once showed up at a Voice of the Faithful meeting and castigated those in attendance. Last year, he decreed that St. Charles Medical Center in Bend, located within the Baker diocese, had "gradually moved away" from the church's ethical directives and could no longer call itself Catholic.

Vasa's tenure in Baker has been rocky, his relationships with his flock uneven, and it culminated with last week's Vatican announcement that Vasa was being moved to become coadjutor of the Santa Rosa diocese.

Such switching of pieces around the episcopal chess board is unusual. But these are unusual times, when those whose guidebook is an absolute and unbending dogmatism leave behind them more confusion and division than unity and understanding.

Santa Rosa, of course, has its own deeply troubled recent past that involved sexual improprieties by its previous bishop, the late Patrick Ziemann, and allegations that the current bishop, Daniel F. Walsh, failed to notify authorities in 2006 in time to prevent a priest charged with molesting a youth from fleeing to Mexico.

Walsh is 73 and must submit a letter of resignation in two years. Vasa, as coadjutor, will take over the diocese when Walsh retires. Perhaps in the next two years Vasa will come to some understanding of what it takes to not be "too difficult" and to be more of what people hope to find in their spiritual leaders.

Beyond his personal evaluation, Vasa left behind in Baker a valuable assessment of the state of the church -- many elements of which apply to the church well beyond Oregon and constitute a good starting point for any bishop pondering pastoral priorities.

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The expanse of the Baker diocese, wrote Vasa, "makes personal communication very difficult. Simply traveling to the parishes of the diocese on a quasi-regular basis is wearing. Maintaining contact with and between the young Catholics of the diocese, which is so very much needed, faces nearly insurmountable obstacles. The small number of Catholics means a significant number of small rural parishes which face difficulties with which you are very much aware. The distances and the small number of Catholics makes the establishment of faith supportive or faith enriching groups something desirable but difficult to sustain. The lack of priestly vocations makes the establishment of a stable presbyterate, with a lifetime commitment to the diocese, a great hope but not a reality. Our many missionary priests are a blessing but their presence demands an ongoing turnover because their true homes are elsewhere."

Amid that list of competing claims on a spiritual leader's time, talent and energy, the pressing issues become inserting oneself into the medical practices of a local hospital or confronting a group seeking accountability from church leaders?

The contrast between what Vasa sees as concerns and what he's become known for provides a graphic depiction of the gap too often apparent between what people experience as the most pressing and chronic needs of the local community and where bishops tend to spend their energies.

What Vasa has outlined in that paragraph are the stresses and fears felt from the chancery office to the back pews in many dioceses today. The questions can be boiled down to a few: How do we do this? How do we continue as a Catholic community when there aren't enough priests to sustain the old model of church? In these circumstances, what can we expect from our leaders?

In the universe of those questions, the high-profile authoritarian standoffs with hospitals and politicians and all the fretting over Catholic identity are of little consequence.

For a lot of reasons, the institutional structure is in trouble, and the people as well as bishops sense it. Bishops in this structure can play an enormously important role by leading the discussion. In most cases, it's a matter of bishops listening to the people, something that's far too rare in today's circumstances. In Vasa's case, it's a matter of the bishop listening to himself and then convincing others that his list of worries deserve deeper consideration.

**For more on Bishop Vasa, see Tom Fox's news brief:
Bishop Vasa letter: plea for understanding**

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