

Pope taps Chaput for Philadelphia

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 18, 2011



Archbishop Charles Chaput (CNS)

DENVER -- Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver, widely perceived both as a leader of the church's conservative wing and a tough administrator with a strong work ethic, has been named by Pope Benedict XVI as the new archbishop of Philadelphia.

Sources confirmed the appointment to NCR, which is scheduled to be announced by the Vatican tomorrow. Chaput replaces Cardinal Justin Rigali, 76, who has led the Philadelphia archdiocese since 2003.

Chaput, 66, steps into an archdiocese in turmoil as a result of the sexual abuse crisis.

In February, a grand jury report asserted that 37 Philadelphia priests facing credible charges of sexual abuse remained in ministry in Philadelphia, despite pledges by the U.S. bishops of "zero tolerance." Rigali immediately suspended three of those priests, then later suspended an additional 21. Rigali also commissioned a former child abuse prosecutor to conduct an investigation, which is on-going.

Also as a result of the grand jury report, a former official of the archdiocese, Monsignor William Lynn, now faces criminal charges -- the first instance in the United States of a Catholic official indicted not for committing abuse, but for failing to stop it.

As Philadelphia Catholics get to know their new leader, the overall contrast with Rigali -- known as a behind-the-scenes power-broker, who prefers to keep a fairly low public profile -- could be jarring.

Far more outspoken, Chaput has emerged over the years as a prominent lightning rod for controversy. He's seen as a strong voice for doctrinal orthodoxy, and he champions a robust role for people of faith in political life.

Among other battles, Chaput has clashed with pro-choice Catholic politicians, publicly rebuked the University of Notre Dame for awarding an honorary doctorate to President Barack Obama, and has been a strong force in national debates over gay marriage and embryonic stem cell research.

Chaput also has sternly called Catholics to adhere to church teaching. In a recent address to a group of

Catholic social workers, for instance, he insisted that church-affiliated charities "have the duty to faithfully embody Catholic beliefs on marriage, the family, social justice, sexuality, abortion and other important issues."

Ahead of the 2008 elections, Chaput published a book titled *Render unto Caesar*, insisting that "people who take God seriously will not remain silent about their faith." Given that Pennsylvania is a major battleground state in American politics, Chaput's visibility and influence seems likely to grow.

In light of the crisis in Philadelphia, Chaput's record on the sexual abuse front is likely to draw special scrutiny.

Admirers say Chaput has a no-nonsense approach to priestly discipline, and doesn't hide behind clerical privilege. Robert Brancato, an abuse victim and a former resident of Denver, is a member of the Survivors' Network of those Abused by Priests, a group ordinarily among the harshest critics of the U.S. bishops. Yet Brancato, now based in South Dakota, has expressed praise for Chaput's tough line.

"One of the first things Chaput said to me was to apologize for what happened to me," Brancato told a newspaper in Rapid City in March.

On occasion, however, SNAP and like-minded groups have blasted Chaput, not only for his handling of specific complaints, but also for fighting efforts to lift the statute of limitations in Colorado to sue the Catholic church over abuse claims.

Despite the fact that Chaput has been rumored to be in line for virtually every major opening in the American church in recent years, his appointment to Philadelphia nonetheless comes as something of a surprise.

Speaking on background, sources told *NCR* that Chaput was a highly personal choice by Pope Benedict. Most insiders considered Chaput a long-shot for Philadelphia, regarding Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Ky., a Pennsylvania native and a prelate with a reputation for brokering compromise, as the favorite.

Benedict, however, tapped Chaput, solidifying his profile as a papal favorite.

In recent years, Benedict turned to Chaput to handle two other sensitive assignments: Chaput was part of a team of bishops tasked with conducting a review of [the Legionaries of Christ](#) [1], and he was also entrusted with a visitation of the Toowoomba diocese in Australia under [Bishop William Morris](#) [2].

That latter investigation led to Benedict's decision to sack Morris, in part because Morris suggested openness to women priests in a pastoral letter.

Chaput will be installed in Philadelphia on Sept. 8. Sources told *NCR* that Rigali may settle after the transition in the Knoxville, Tenn., diocese, where his longtime friend and protégé, Bishop Richard Stika, has prepared a residence.

Although Chaput is a native of Concordia, Kansas, and has served as a bishop in two Western dioceses -- Rapid City and Denver -- he does have a background in Pennsylvania. He studied at a Capuchin college in western Pennsylvania in the mid-1960s, and later worked for the Capuchins in Pittsburgh during the 1970s.

Chaput also has a special interest in Native American issues, given that his mother, who died in 2007, was a member of the Potawatomi tribe.

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