

Chaput: The Problem With Culture Warrior Bishops

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 19, 2011 | Distinctly Catholic

As I wrote last week, we should all pray for whoever was picked to take over the Archdiocese of Philadelphia which has been in meltdown since February when a second Grand Jury Report indicated that archdiocesan officials had failed to follow their own guidelines regarding the protection of children. In addition, Philadelphia has had few priestly vocations in recent years compared to comparably sized dioceses. And, still worse, the archdiocese is due for a reconfiguration, and closure, of many parishes, a process that is painful even if it is done well.

With the news that Denver's Archbishop Charles Chaput has been named to replace Rigali in Philadelphia, I am overcome with a felt need to pray not only for the new archbishop but more especially for the people and priests of Philadelphia. Of course, none of us can know how Chaput will govern in Philadelphia, but his leadership to date gives us some indication and that history does not improve the prospect. The people of Philadelphia need someone who could provide balm and they are getting someone who throws bombs. They need someone who can focus like a laser beam on the *ad intra* difficulties facing a local Church beset by decades of clericalism not someone who seems only to be stirred by *ad extra* concerns. Chaput is a culture warrior, and that is not a compliment.

What does it mean to be a *culture warrior*? Let's take one example. In Denver, when confronted with a decision by a pastor to bar the child of lesbian parents from attending a Catholic school, Chaput agreed with the pastor and wrote of the decision: "The policies of our Catholic school system exist to protect all parties involved, including the children of homosexual couples and the couples themselves. Our schools are meant to be *partners in faith* with parents. If parents don't respect the beliefs of the Church, or live in a manner that openly rejects those beliefs, then partnering with those parents becomes very difficult, if not impossible. It also places unfair stress on the children, who find themselves caught in the middle, and on their teachers, who have an obligation to teach the authentic faith of the Church." Most parents who send their children to Catholic schools want an environment where the Catholic faith is fully taught and practiced. That simply can't be done if teachers need to worry about wounding the feelings of their students or about alienating students from their parents. That isn't fair to anyone -- including the wider school community. Persons who have an understanding of marriage and family life sharply different from Catholic belief are often people of sincerity and good will. They have other, excellent options for education and should see in them the better course for their children. Hmmm.

Set aside the paternalistic, "Bishop knows best," quality to the assertions about what is best for the child and the family. I am wondering about this claim "If parents don't respect the beliefs of the Church, or live in a manner that openly rejects those beliefs, then partnering with those parents becomes very difficult, if not impossible." How does that square with the fact that Catholic schools permit Protestants who *openly reject* certain Catholic beliefs? Or non-Christians who *openly reject* the divinity of Christ? Does the archdiocese of Denver deny admission to the children of parents who are divorced and remarried? Or is it just the children of gays who get discriminated against? And how does Chaput's argument square with the argument made by the bishops in defending the DREAM Act? If we agree that it is wrong to penalize the children of immigrants for the decisions

of their parents, why should we penalize the children of gay parents for their decisions? Most of all, how can Chaput justify ? theologically or pastorally - baptizing the children of gay parents, and then denying that baptized child a Catholic education? Chaput's decision only makes sense if the objective is to score a point in the culture wars.

Of course, in Boston, Chaput's seminary classmate, Cardinal Sean O'Malley reached a completely different conclusion in circumstances that were almost identical, adopting a policy that does not discriminate against any children. Cardinal O'Malley is just as orthodox and just as conservative as Archbishop Chaput. The difference? O'Malley is not a culture warrior, he is a pastor. Here is how O'Malley explained his decision in his blog:

?As a young bishop in the West Indies I once celebrated a memorial Mass for a local ?madame? who ran a brothel near my Cathedral. It was said she smuggled women in from other islands in oil barrels for her business. Some women suffocated in the crossing. She herself was murdered by her lover. At the Mass I met the woman's daughter, a lovely little girl. I asked her what grade she was in. She replied that she didn't go to school. I sent a stern glance to her grandmother, who said: ?Her name is the same as that of the brothel. The other children were so cruel to her, she left the public school.? I told her grandmother, ?Take her to the Catholic school tomorrow.?

Catholic schools exist for the good of the children and our admission standards must reflect that. We have never had categories of people who were excluded. We have often given preference to children from a parish where a school is located, siblings of children already enrolled at the school or Catholic children from nearby parishes. Sometimes we might not be able to accept children, because of behavioral problems or other circumstances that would be disruptive to a school community. While there are legitimate reasons that might lead to a decision not to admit a child, I believe all would agree that the good of the child must always be our primary concern.?

The difference in tone is obvious, but the difference is more than one of tone. Cardinal O'Malley, by avoiding an opportunity to win a skirmish in the culture war instead provided his flock with a parable worthy of the Gospels. He did not just do right by the child, he called everyone involved ? and everyone reading his blog, to holiness which, for a Christian, must include reaching out to and embracing those whom society marginalizes. The problem with the culture war approach is that it loses the Gospel in its defensive moralism. So busy wagging a finger at the culture (certainly never at oneself or at the Church) the culture warrior never engages the culture in a way that makes evangelization possible. As Cardinal Francis George has written, ?We have to form people with a genuine love of today's city and love our culture itself. Even with its demonic elements, the culture must be loved, because you cannot evangelize what you do not love.?

[I wrote last week](#) [1] about how Bishop Tobin of Providence has exhibited the kind of defensive culture war stance. It is a religious posture with a long tradition in America, going all the way back to Increase Mather, but it has resulted primarily in pietistic faith and, then, in rationalism. It cannot generate culture, the only sign of a living faith.

Another one of Archbishop Chaput's least fine moments was [the article he wrote attacking Father John Jenkins and the University of Notre Dame](#) [2] over its decision to invite President Obama to speak at graduation and to bestow upon him an honorary degree. Mind you, Notre Dame has extended the invitation and the honor to every president since Eisenhower. How does Chaput think it would look if they stopped with the first black president? Did Chaput think to speak with any African-American Catholics? I sometimes attend a black church here in DC and they are quite conservative but they are also enormously proud of Obama, as the Irish felt pride in the Kennedys and Latinos felt pride in Sotomayor. How do you think it would have made those black Catholics feel if Obama had been shunned? But, Chaput seemed to know Father Jenkins' motives inside and out. ?There was no excuse ? none, except intellectual vanity ? for the university to persist in its course,? Chaput wrote. He said

the university violated the norms the bishops laid down in the document entitled "Catholics in Public Life," but felt no need to recognize that perhaps that text did not apply here because the President, while living a public life, is not a Catholic. Chaput accused Notre Dame of "prostituting out Catholic identity." It was his way, or the highway. Mind you, he wrote these words after the ceremony and after the extraordinary Laetare speech by Judge Noonan that made the ever salient point the well-informed consciences can disagree. In the real world, that is true. In the culture war world, all disagreement is total, it is always us vs. them, one always places the worst possible interpretation on other's intentions. And, what disturbs most about Chaput's article? It was written after the fact, not in the heat of the moment, after time to let his emotions calm down, and yet there is still so much anger and venom in the text, it is shocking.

For those who think this selection indicates Pope Benedict's uncomplicated blessing of the culture war model, ask and answer this question: Can you imagine Cardinal Angelo Scola writing that column about Notre Dame or reacting to the child of gay parents in that way? Of course not. The new archbishop of Milan is always urging Catholics to make sure we live our lives in such a way that the innate attractiveness of the Gospel shines forth. Scola does not scowl. He does not wag his finger at anybody. With Scola, you encounter his infectious joy at living the Gospel and you want to be with him. If one has to choose, I would rather the party of joy and mystery has the cathedra in Milan and the neo-con culture warriors have the throne in Philly than the other way round.

Last week, as I sat at Mass listening to the Gospel, I wondered how Archbishop Chaput would preach on that text. The Master is quite explicit "do not pull up the weeds because, in doing so you might destroy the wheat. At the end time, the Lord will send his angels and they will separate the wheat from the weeds. One of the problems with culture warriors is that they always think it is the end time, and they also mistake themselves for God's angels. They are always trying to uproot the weeds with little concern about any damage their actions might cause to the wheat. So focused on the weeds, and so focused on their own role in the divine economy, so absent of trust in God to deal with the weeds in His own way and in His own time, they are unable to recognize that the little faith of the mustard seed can grow into a great tree, that the leaven will affect many loaves.

It is my sincere hope that having achieved his new high office, Archbishop Chaput will ponder last Sunday's Gospel and see how directly it challenges his culture war pessimism, his scolding, scowling way of engaging the culture. I hope he will meet his new flock and, where he sees little faith, he will hope it will grow, that he will not extinguish the flickering flame. I hope he will learn to listen, not just to preach, to be less concerned with policing the culture and more concerned with building up the faith of his flock. I hope he will stop reducing religion to moralism. I am a silver lining kinda guy but I confess that it is difficult for me to discern such a silver lining in today's appointment. No one would be more delighted than me to be proven wrong.

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