

Philadelphia urgently needs truth, compassion and healing

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[Editor's Note: *Charles Chaput was installed as the archbishop of Philadelphia on Thursday, Sept. 8. You may want to read the text of Chaput's homily, see [Homily of the Most Reverend Charles J. Chaput \[1\]](#), before reading the following editorial.]*

Philadelphia is an archdiocese in which the people have been deeply wounded by a significant number of their priests and the last three cardinal archbishops. It is a place where children, mostly boys, have been raped and molested, in some cases repeatedly and over years. It is a place where the wounds of the priest sex abuse crisis are perhaps the most exposed of any diocese, and where, with each new revelation of testimony by former archdiocesan officials, the wounds are scored open anew.

It is a place where the last three cardinal archbishops have deeply betrayed the trust of the Catholic community and that of the wider culture. They deceived the Catholic community, were complicit in hiding crimes and criminals and acted first to protect their own reputations and that of the institution to the detriment of the community's most vulnerable.

The Catholic community in Philadelphia is in desperate need of a credible example of the truth of the Incarnation that sustains us: That the divine is mediated through the human. In that context it is not God's intent that we passively accept abuse and betrayal from our leaders, hoping that somewhere down the line we'll understand the will of God.

But that's what the faithful of Philadelphia were told by their new archbishop, Charles Chaput, in his first homily as leader of the archdiocese: "All the events of a believer's life are shaped by the will of a loving God. God's purpose undergirds everything that happens to Christians, for God is truly in control. So in the midst of the turmoil of the church in our time, specifically in Philadelphia, this feast of Mary's birth should remind us of God's loving plan and that "all things work for the good of those who love God and who are called according to his purpose."

We don't ordinarily listen in to the first homily of a newly appointed bishop. The events are largely ceremonial and often filled with unremarkable platitudes and promises of humble leadership and so on.

Rarely during such occasions are we reminded, though it occasionally happens, that the power of the incarnation is contained not in dogma or the re-enactment of coronation, but in the most essentially human contacts. In the case of a bishop it would come in that moment in which one senses that he actually understands us, our lives, the tensions of the moment we live with, the burden of being a member of a community where such egregious and indefensible sins by its ministers as destroying children have now become as much a part of the culture as fish on Friday once was.

Sex abuse is the respectable term we apply to rape and sodomy of the most vicious sort against children. In his homily, Chaput couldn't even bring himself to use that term. He spoke of the church in Philadelphia facing "serious challenges," "failures," "problems." What better context than the Catholic Mass for acknowledging the

victims, but Chaput never uttered that word either.

In the Gospels, the most powerful moments of transformation, those stories that speak to our souls, never follow a delineation of Jesus' bona fides. Rather they occur on the run, in the midst of the rabble.

It is human pleading and a touch that gets Jesus to heal the woman of bleeding; it is the persistence of the woman who *has* to have her daughter healed that saves a child. Jesus risks scorn to meet with the society's sinners and throws over the religious mandates of the day to save the adulterous woman from her absolutely convinced and murderous accusers. And it is deep friendship that resurrects Lazarus. At the heart of it all is a boundless compassion, a bending, if you will, to the pleas of the distressed. These were not the interactions between a pre-determined God and his docile patrons waiting to see which way the wind blew.

If Philadelphians were hoping for that look, at least metaphorically, for that touch that said "I understand how deeply you've been hurt," it was nowhere to be found in the new archbishop's first homily.

He rather strangely, instead, chose to characterize his arrival as one half of an arranged marriage, a romance-less union at that, but a choice guided by the Holy Spirit. And he told the people that "the results are always joyful if we commit our wills to cooperating with God's plan."

And what, one might ask, are we to make of the Spirit's wisdom, given the last three cardinals and "the failures" with which they are associated?

What if we took Chaput's rather predestination-sounding theology seriously? Does that apply to himself? Are church leaders to unquestioningly make their way, paying the bills and staffing institutions and accepting whatever comes as God's will?

The fog of pieties in Chaput's homily obscured any humanity or sense of understanding of how seriously the church of Philadelphia has been battered. Instead the people received oblique references to the awful scandal and a primer that might have come from an out-of-date seminary text on the nature of the episcopacy. At least half the homily was about himself and how he perceives the office and its symbols.

A bishop's tenure, of course, is about far more than the first homily. Inasmuch as this one signaled how the new leader perceives himself and the community, it was a telling performance.

Philadelphia presents a particularly urgent case in need of truth, compassion and healing. What isn't needed at the moment is someone who insists that the church "is not defined by its failures" and its "critics and those who dislike us."

The church in this case is rightly being defined by its "failures" and will continue to be until it regains the trust of its own people. And it won't regain trust by blaming the problems on its critics. In this instance, outside enemies are the least of the problem. The church's leaders and certain of its priests have been enemy enough to the community.

In this first encounter with their new leader, however, the faithful in Philadelphia found little acknowledgment of the pain they've endured and the degree to which they've been betrayed.

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[1] <http://whispersintheloggia.blogspot.com/2011/09/to-truly-be-bishop.html>