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Abp Chaput Throws Gauntlet at +Dolan's Feet

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Distinctly Catholic

When I got an email last night asking if I had seen Archbishop Charles Chaput's statement on the HHS mandate revisions announced Friday, I thought to myself, "Who died and elected Archbishop Chaput the president of the USCCB?"

Since the administration announced its revisions on Friday, one of the remarkable qualities of the discussion has been the way other key stakeholders have refrained from issuing any but the most anodyne, cautious statement. The Catholic Health Association, Catholic Charities USA, other bishops, Notre Dame, if they have commented at all have basically repeated the line put out by the USCCB "we are looking at the issue more closely. I suspect this reticence was coordinated, recognizing the need for Catholics to stay together on this issue if we are to maintain any semblance of leverage in further negotiations. As well, this reticence reflects a confidence in Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the president of the USCCB, who has made consultation and fair play a hallmark of his leadership at the conference.

So, it struck me as strange that Archbishop Chaput would get out in front of the conference by issuing a statement on his own. This "speaking out of turn" challenges the collegiality and unity of the conference itself. But, we all know Chaput is a bit of a culture warrior, he fancies himself exercising a prophetic voice, and so I was not entirely surprised he would speak out of turn and issue a blistering criticism of the Obama administration's revisions of the rule.

What I did not expect is that Chaput's statement would be a much more direct, even snarky, challenge to the leadership of Cardinal Dolan. Here are Chaput's closing remarks:

One of the issues America's bishops now face is how best to respond to an HHS mandate that remains unnecessary, coercive and gravely flawed. In the weeks ahead the bishops of our country, myself included, will need both prudence and courage ? the kind of courage that gives prudence spine and results in right action, whatever the cost. Please pray that God guides our discussions.

Does his Grace of Philadelphia really think His Eminence of New York lacks a spine? And, his breezy dismissal of the need to balance interests ? ?whatever the cost?? ? is the hallmark of a culture warrior, the idea that his view is so certain and so obvious that everyone should rush to the barricades in its defense, this way of thinking is chilling. It is not fanaticism, to be sure, but it is walking in that direction.

This way of thinking ? ?whatever the cost? - is also histrionic, stuffed with an inappropriate degree of self-importance. There is no recognition of the good faith of those with whom he disagrees. Every issue is seen against the backdrop of a larger narrative in which Good and Evil are fighting tooth and nail, an apocalyptic, even Jansenistic, sensibility that seems to me not only unhelpful but excessive. We are talking about insurance regulations after all, not the Eschaton. And, there is this heightened, misplaced concern not only with the arguments and tactics of one's political opponents, but with the possibility of betrayal from one's own side. He calls for prudence and courage, but he really just wants rejectionism.

I am reluctant to engage Chaput's arguments, which are not very persuasive and most of which I addressed yesterday. He quotes Notre Dame's Gerard Bradley, who has an interesting mind to be sure, although I think he, like many lawyers, misunderstands the political reality and overstates the legal one. But, what really interested me was Chaput's citing a column in the National Review Online. If the archbishop had scrolled up at NRO's website, he would have found a scurrilous bit of nativism in their editorial on immigration reform, the subject I had intended to write about this morning but which I will engage tomorrow. The NRO is not only a mouthpiece for one party, it is a mouthpiece for those who worry about RINO's, Republicans in Name Only, in short, it evidences the kind of apocalyptic sensibilities in the political sphere that catch Chaput's eye. Consider this from Chaput's column:

The scholar Yuval Levin has stressed that the new HHS mandate proposal, ?like the versions that have preceded it, betrays a complete lack of understanding of both religious liberty and religious conscience.? In reality, despite the appearance of compromise, ?the government has forced a needless and completely avoidable confrontation and has knowingly put many religious believers in an impossible situation.?

The administration's perceived lack of understanding is ?complete? and the confrontation is ?completely avoidable.? I worry when analysts recklessly use a word like ?complete? or ?total.? Surely if the twentieth century taught us anything, it is that ?total? is a dangerous adjective. Yet the Tea Partiers in the GOP, like Chaput in this column, just can't help themselves. It is always all or nothing. That cast of mind is dangerous not least because there is something self-destructive in it. And, the funny thing is that I think even the Republicans in Congress no longer want anything to do with this fight over contraception.

This disposition to turn every fight into an apocalyptic fight must be stopped, certainly within the Church. One of the reasons for the bishops to work collegially through their conference is because it strengthens their hand in negotiations, but the deeper reason is to show the world that while any assemblage of more than 200 people will include great differences of personality and divergent political views, the bishops of the United States are united by something deeper than politics. Especially on an issue like the HHS mandate, which is ripe for political exploitation, it is important for the bishops to work together and speak with one voice. And, while it would be one thing if a stray bishop in a small diocese spoke against the conference, Archbishop Chaput is the metropolitan archbishop of a major and historic see.

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Last autumn, when Cardinal Dolan wrote a blog post explaining why he extended an invitation to both presidential candidates to attend the Al Smith dinner, the comments were so nasty, so over-the-top, they closed the comment box on the column. That was a taste of how the Tea Party mentality had entered into the Church. The question for the leadership of the conference and for the nuncio and, ultimately, for the Holy See, is whether appointing culture warrior bishops does not facilitate that Tea Party mentality and, if, like John Boehner and Karl Rove, the authorities will not end up worrying that they have created a monster primed to turn on them.

Note to Readers: Later this morning, I will respond to Michael Gerson's post on the HHS mandate revisions.

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