

An afternoon with America's Capuchin heavyweights

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 31, 2013 All Things Catholic

In a return to my spiritual roots, I spoke this week to a group of Capuchins from the Province of St. Augustine taking part in a chapter meeting in a Pittsburgh suburb. I was educated and formed in the faith by Capuchins out in western Kansas, and I've always thought of myself as part of their extended family.

My talk, however, was just the undercard. The main event came Tuesday afternoon, when the Capuchins heard from their two most prominent members in the United States: Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston and Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia. Both spoke on "The Capuchin Call to New Evangelization."

Ever since the Counter-Reformation, Capuchins have prided themselves on tackling the toughest jobs the church has to offer, and these two are certainly proof of the point. In Boston and Philadelphia, they've found themselves wrestling with fallout from the church's sexual abuse scandals as well as massive financial challenges.

(Chaput joked that St. Francis didn't want his brothers to be bishops because it might sow pride, but given the realities of the job today, he'd probably say it was good for them.)

Both are also ecclesiastical heavyweights. O'Malley was appointed by Pope Francis as one of [eight cardinals to be his key advisers](#) [1] and profiles as the new pope's go-to guy in the English-speaking world. Chaput is an articulate spokesperson for the evangelical wing of the church and helps set the tone for the American bishops on faith and politics. The Capuchins have 91 bishops around the world, but perhaps the two most consequential are these former classmates now serving on the East Coast. (O'Malley is currently the lone Capuchin cardinal, and Chaput is almost certainly set to become the second.)

Listening to both men Tuesday, two things seemed clear.

One is that their Capuchin formation has left an imprint. Both O'Malley and Chaput are comfortable with collaboration and debate; both stress closeness to ordinary people; both are committed to living the Gospel without gloss or compromise; and both offer plain talk without a lot of diplomatic guile. Both also have a lively sense of humor and don't take themselves overly seriously. In that sense, one can talk about a "Capuchin style" of being a bishop.

Yet they're hardly carbon copies of one another, beginning with the visually obvious point that O'Malley wore his brown Capuchin habit during the chapter meeting, as he does in virtually every setting, while Chaput arrived in his customary black clerical attire. While they agree on most things, O'Malley's passion tends to be for the poor, Chaput's for preserving the integrity of the faith in a highly secular culture.

Religious life is supposed to foster unity without smothering diversity, and both the similarities and the contrasts between these two old friends would suggest that spirit is alive and well among the OFM Caps.

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In the run-up to the papal conclave in March, nobody was more a crowd favorite in Rome than O'Malley, reflecting the fact that Franciscans tend to be rock stars in *il bel paese*. His look and style evoked popular Italian memories of Padre Pio, the famed Capuchin mystic, healer and saint.

On Tuesday, O'Malley was introduced by the minister general of the Capuchins, Swiss-born Fr. Mauro Jöhri, who traveled from Rome to be at the meeting. Jöhri told the group that had it been up to the Italian people, O'Malley would be pope -- adding that the Capuchins in Rome were thrilled and proud about the buzz.

O'Malley said he knew the enthusiasm was related to his religious order and told his fellow Capuchins that "we have to make sure we deserve that affection."

Jöhri also said O'Malley inspired him to put protecting children and vulnerable adults from abuse on the agenda at the order's last general chapter meeting. There was strong resistance, he said, but he persisted because he knew "I had Cardinal Sean behind me."

Drawing on his own biography, O'Malley suggested that outreach to the poor is a powerful missionary calling card.

O'Malley said he was living in Washington in 1968 when race riots broke out following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. He was part of a group of friars who sheltered roughly 700 people, many elderly and Hispanic, in a local church for a week. Among other things, he said, a baby was born in their impromptu community that week.

Afterward, O'Malley said, he took part in the "Poor People's March" organized by Ralph Abernathy, sleeping in one of the tent cities and watching as off-duty police lobbed tear gas at the protestors. (Fortunately, he said, torrential rains during the march meant mud swallowed most of the canisters.)

Another early formative experience, O'Malley said, came when he was in the Pittsburgh area and asked to serve as a prison chaplain. Eager to prove his mettle, he decided to preach his first sermon on great escapes in the Bible -- Daniel getting out of the lion's den, Peter being delivered from prison by an angel, and so on.

"I certainly had their rapt attention," O'Malley said. The coda, however, was that six prisoners busted out of jail that very night, leading to an angry phone call to his superior.

As he spent time at the prison, O'Malley said, he noticed an insidious Catch-22. To get parole, inmates had to have a job. Yet many spent up to 23 hours a day in their cells and had no way to find work. O'Malley thus hit up his dad for \$1,000 to launch a house-painting company for the prisoners, despite knowing nothing, he added, about painting. Money was so tight the lone vehicle he could afford was a beat-up red station wagon, which only drove in reverse. O'Malley nonetheless managed to convince a couple of influential locals to hire the company, which provided references for future jobs, and the inmates made a go of it.

O'Malley also spoke at length about his experiences at the Centro Católico Hispano in Washington, D.C., where he ministered to immigrants and refugees during the 1970s and '80s.

When he was first assigned to the Centro, O'Malley said, he was living in a Capuchin residence. He quickly asked for permission to move into the apartment building where the center was housed in a tough D.C. neighborhood "because I wanted to share the life of the people I was serving."

He told the story of once sitting down with a *campesino* from El Salvador, who tearfully asked him to read a letter from his wife back home complaining he had abandoned his family. The *campesino* couldn't understand

the reaction because he said he sent virtually all his meager earnings home every week, carefully depositing the envelopes in a blue mailbox near the center. O'Malley said he looked out the window and realized that what this immigrant believed to be a mailbox was actually a trash bin.

"It was a lesson in the hardships of being a stranger in a strange land," O'Malley said.

O'Malley said many of the Hispanics who gravitated around the center were women working as domestic servants for diplomats in the D.C. area. In some cases, he said, it was a thinly veiled form of human trafficking, with the women subject to appalling sexual and financial exploitation.

When he would confront the diplomats, O'Malley said, they would often claim they treated the domestics as if they were members of their own family, leading O'Malley to reply, "If that's true, I'm glad I'm not part of your family."

The Centro Católico was located in a ramshackle apartment building that, at the time, O'Malley said, had "no heat, no hot water, and rats the size of cats." O'Malley promptly organized a rent strike, encouraging tenants to put their money in escrow until improvements were made. (In the end, a tenants' cooperative actually bought the building.)

The tenants insisted on making O'Malley their president, and he laughingly told the story of his effort at the first meeting to persuade them to give up their guns, since shootings were a common occurrence. After his impassioned appeal, he said, an elderly grandmother whipped a massive pistol out of her purse and told him: "You're a priest, so nobody's going to mess with you, but I'm keeping my gun."

Overall, O'Malley suggested solidarity with the poor is an important component of the new evangelization.

"I'm very happy that Pope Francis is emphasizing our social teaching," he said, "because it gives people another way to look at the church."

O'Malley said his favorite line from Francis so far came from the Holy Thursday chism Mass, when the pope said shepherds should carry "the smell of their sheep." Pointedly, O'Malley added: "I'm not sure how many today would pass the smell test."

O'Malley said Capuchins in particular can serve the new evangelization by being "instruments of peace and promoters of unity."

During a Q&A session, O'Malley fielded a question about the child abuse scandals. Among other points, he acknowledged that accountability for bishops who fail to apply the church's tough new policies is still a "big problem," saying that "we need protocols to deal with these kinds of problems."

Finally, O'Malley offered a memorable sound bite illustrating why Pope Francis, who famously longs for a "poor church for the poor," finds him so simpatico.

"Poverty does not always lead to love," O'Malley said. "But love always leads to poverty, to the poor and God's little ones."

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Chaput's presentation was less biographical and more thematic, boiling down to a strong call to be "clear and unequivocal" in presenting Jesus Christ, including standing foursquare behind church teachings that can be a tough sell in a highly secular culture.

"The Gospel suffers from over-hearing," he said, adding that it's a special danger for "those who preach a lot."

Chaput warned that the term "new evangelization" likewise risks becoming an "overused and under-thought slogan" unless it's founded on a clear-eyed understanding of what he called the "pastoral terrain" of the times.

Surveying that terrain, Chaput didn't mince words in describing what he sees as the high stakes.

"Evil is real," he said. "Evil is murderous, and it's all around us. We are involved in a struggle for the soul of the world, and we can't live in a world of make-believe. This is true whether you choose to believe it or not."

Chaput ticked off a series of statistics illustrating decline in practice of the faith. For instance, he said weddings in the church have been dropping by 60,000 a year for the last 40 years, and the church has been closing Catholic schools every four days for the last two decades.

"In much of the once-Christian developed world," he said, "many self-described Christians are, in fact, pagans." Orthodox belief, he said, has often been supplanted by a kind of "practical atheism." He cited a recent essay describing the *de facto* creed of American teenagers today as a sort of "moralistic and therapeutic deism" and said it reflects adult beliefs, too.

This trend, Chaput said, is why a new evangelization is required.

"The old evangelization has faded into this sort of vague spirituality," he said, arguing that such a religious outlook is incapable of fostering "self-knowledge, self-mastery or genuine community."

Chaput said he's convinced the future will bring more hardships for the church, including a "huge plummeting" of financial contributions, which will make it more difficult to do things such as take proper care of retired clergy. Nonetheless, he said, those problems "will give us a chance to be better friars" by "starting over again."

During the Q&A, a fellow Capuchin asked Chaput if he saw some points of light amid all the shadows. It seemed an invitation to soften his assessment, but Chaput didn't bite.

"I see some lights, but they're not many and they're small," he replied.

"There's a tendency to be Pollyannaish, to pretend everything is fine," he said, but "we are in worse shape now than I would ever have imagined even 10 years ago, as a society and as a church."

In light of social opposition to church teaching on matters such as marriage and sexuality, he said, "If we want to fit in, we have to give up our faith."

Chaput's prescription, however, was not for fire-and-brimstone condemnation.

"If we spend more time evangelizing, we'll spend less time criticizing," he said. On gay marriage, for instance, he predicted that "we can't win the argument if people don't first believe in Jesus." His suggestion was that if people can be reintroduced to a real passion for the faith, it will provide a fresh point of departure for today's cultural fights.

In terms of the Capuchin contribution to new evangelization, Chaput offered three core ideas.

First, he said, those formed in a Franciscan spirit should "preach as brothers," meaning that they "speak from the concrete experience of ordinary men and women because we know them."

Part of that picture, Chaput said, is calling people to a "clear, faithful and uncomplicated embrace of the Gospel of life."

Second, he said, Capuchins should "be pastors as brothers," exercising authority in a spirit of brotherhood. For instance, he said, that means "giving laity a clear and definite share of pastoral decision-making responsibilities."

"I don't see how a Capuchin can be a pastor without a pastoral council to remind him of his place in creation," Chaput said.

Third, he called for a revival of secular Franciscan communities in the life of the church "at all levels." Too often, Chaput said, these groups are composed of "old people or left-leaning social justice folks from the 1960s," but they should include the "full spectrum" of Catholics.

Chaput also rejected the notion that religious life ought to be a form of "prophecy against the church."

"The only form of religious life worth its salt is prophecy against oneself," he said.

Legendary for his candor, Chaput didn't shrink from chiding his confreres on at least one point, telling them he believes they missed the boat with regard to a renewal effort launched by Fr. Benedict Groeschel and a handful of fellow Capuchins in the 1980s. Groeschel and his followers broke off in 1987 to found the "Franciscan Friars of the Renewal," having decided that the climate within the Capuchins wasn't sufficiently receptive to their more traditional outlook.

In a vintage touch, Chaput said he was sorry he missed the fight over Groeschel because he was appointed a bishop in 1988 and had other fish to fry.

Despite his reputation as a staunch conservative, Chaput said fidelity means being "both conservative and liberal."

"We have to be faithful to the Gospel, but also terribly risky in trying new things, encouraging others more creative than you to try it if you can't," he said.

Asked about the option for the poor, Chaput said for him, it means in the first place having friends who are poor.

"It begins in personal relationships," he said. "If you do that, you can do almost anything without losing your commitment to poverty."

Finally, Chaput commented on parishes he's been compelled to close in Philadelphia because of financial shortfalls and the blowback those decisions generate, especially from inner-city communities. In essence, he said blame can't be laid entirely at the feet of the archdiocese because the communities themselves have to take responsibility for failure to generate vocations and to pass on the faith.

"I'd love to see some of these communities say we have to start over, setting up shop in the storefronts rather than these huge churches we can't maintain anymore," he said. "But nobody does that."

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If you know a little Capuchin history, you know the order wasn't exactly wrapped in a warm, loving embrace at the beginning.

When a friar named Matteo da Bascio started calling for a return to strict observance of Francis' rule in 1520, he

and his companions were forced into hiding from church authorities who wanted to arrest them for flaunting religious obedience. They eventually secured papal approval, but that wasn't the end of controversy. Da Bascio actually left the order he founded 15 years later out of fear of censure, and another early Capuchin leader, Bernardino Ochino, was denounced to the Inquisition for heresy, abandoned the Catholic church to become a Calvinist, got married and had kids, and finally died in exile in Poland.

Perhaps that background helps explain why one point of overlap between O'Malley and Chaput on Tuesday was a strong plug for the new movements in the church, such as the Focolare, the Neocatechumenate, Communion and Liberation, and so on. Despite the resistance those movements tend to generate in some circles, both prelates used the word "ardor" in describing what they bring to the table.

O'Malley said the movements play a key role in a transition away from seeing the laity as consumers of evangelization to giving them a "sense of mission" as protagonists. He granted that some of these movements may have a bit of a "messianic complex," but called for time and patience as they work through it.

Chaput was asked about the presence of the Neocatechumenate in Denver, where he served as archbishop prior to Philadelphia. He noted they had been invited under his predecessor, Cardinal James Francis Stafford, but said he welcomed their contributions.

More broadly, Chaput suggested the movements can provide models of living the Gospel in a "fresh and new way," much as St. Francis did in his time.

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