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Archbishop Chaput's right-wing funk

by Charles J. Reid Jr.

Perspective

Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia put into words the anxiety many right-wing Catholics must be feeling at the extraordinary popularity Pope Francis has been enjoying. In an interview with John L. Allen Jr., Chaput, speaking on behalf of his conservative followers, said that members of the right wing of the Catholic church "generally have not been really happy about his election." The pope, Chaput stated, will "have to care for them, too."

What worries Chaput in particular is the sudden interest in the new pope from unfamiliar quarters. Practicing Catholics love the pope, of course, "but they're not actually the ones who really talk to me about the new pope. The ones who do are nonpracticing Catholics or people who aren't Catholic or not even Christian." And why should this be so? Chaput has his suspicions: Yes, these outsiders are thrilled by the new pope's friendliness and his warmth, but "I think they would prefer a church that wouldn't have strict norms and ideas about the moral life and about doctrine."

Wow. Where do we start? We could talk about the parable of the prodigal son, since Chaput truly sounds a great deal like the adventuresome young man's older brother, the one who stayed home and toiled with his father and grew resentful when the old man slew the fatted calf upon his brother's return. Or we could talk about the shepherd who rejoiced over finding his lost sheep.

But let's focus instead on what it means to be an evangelical church. For some time now, decades really, the church has been turning in upon itself. This is most especially noticeable in conservative circles. The culture is seen as hostile. The ambient culture is "pagan," to use Chaput's description. Indeed, he has even called some Catholics pagan in their approach to the faith.

But shouting "pagan, pagan" is no way to win souls. And this is evidenced by even the briefest consideration of Catholic membership statistics. Catholic membership has grown in Africa, but it has lost

members in Latin America to more enthusiastic forms of evangelical Protestantism. And in the United States, Catholic membership would be in decline were it not buoyed by immigration.

The right wing's favored response to these dismal trends is to blame the left. But the right wing needs to know that it has controlled the church hierarchy for some three decades now. It is the right wing that must look in the mirror. A stricter form of boundary police will not attract outsiders; it will repel them. Indeed, it has.

Francis has gotten the message and the tone just right. Jesus, after all, came not for the saved but for the sinners. He dined with tax collectors. He routinely and frequently forgave prostitutes. He was followed in his evangelizing by women who did not come from respectable homes. He promised the water of eternal life to a woman who was even then living out of wedlock.

The new evangelization about which so many on the Catholic right speak is not about new and better forms of border security. It is about the *imitatio Christi* -- the imitation of Christ. Like Christ, Francis means to be evangelical, and that means finding people where Christ found them -- in desperate shape, in need of forgiveness and love -- and offering them hope.

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