

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

September 13, 2013 at 9:07am

Bishop Tobin 'disappointed' with Pope Francis

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Distinctly Catholic

In July, during World Youth Day, my colleague John Allen asked Archbishop Charles Chaput about Catholics' reactions to Pope Francis, and part of the archbishop's reply was: "This is already true of the right wing of the church. They generally have not been really happy about his election, from what I've been able to read and to understand."

Now we know who Chaput was talking to. In his diocesan paper, Providence, R.I., Bishop Thomas Tobin offered his reflections on Pope Francis' first six months. In the course of that interview, he said:

The other thing I want to say though, is that I'm a little bit disappointed in Pope Francis that he hasn't, at least that I'm aware of, said much about unborn children, about abortion, and many people have noticed that. I think it would be very helpful if Pope Francis would address more directly the evil of abortion and to encourage those who are involved in the pro-life movement. It's one thing for him to reach out and embrace and kiss little children and infants as he has on many occasions. It strikes me that it would also be wonderful if in a spiritual way he would reach out and embrace and kiss unborn children.

I can imagine a bishop voicing such a direct criticism of the pope to a fellow cleric over a cocktail. I can even imagine a bishop, forgetting he is speaking to a reporter, speaking off-the-cuff and voicing such a direct criticism of the pope. What I could not have imagined is that a bishop would voice such a criticism, not think better about it, and let the thing be published in his own diocesan newspaper. Bishop Tobin is either very brave or very reckless.

But there is a deeper problem here. Of course, the pope has spoken almost every day about human

dignity. He has, in word and deed, spoken about the absolute, unconditional love God has for us all and how that love, its promise and its obligation must catapult us Catholics out of any lethargy, or clericalism, or part-time vocational attitudes, or Pelagianism, to embrace each other, especially the poor and the vulnerable. What the pope has not done is speak in such a way that he is easily turned into a divisive figure in the culture wars, his message exploited for political purposes, the Creed he proclaims reduced first to ethics, then to legalisms, and finally to a political program. He is challenging us all when he speaks about human dignity. The fact that Bishop Tobin does not see this speaks to his own limitations, not to the Holy Father's.

Lastly, a note to the nuncio. Unless you want to spend the next few years defending Pope Francis in the face of such criticisms from bishops on your own, the ternas for new appointments must include men who "get it," men who understand what the Holy Father is trying to do, to change the conversation the church was having with the culture, a conversation the church was losing, and renew the proclamation of the Gospel by being more humble, less quick to condemn, more engaging with those with whom we may disagree a lot and, especially, by getting out of our sacristies (or our diocesan newspapers) and letting ourselves be re-evangelized by encountering the flesh of Jesus in the wounded flesh of our broken humanity. Pope Francis is achieving such a powerful response because he has captured the excitement of the Gospel. Bishop Tobin remains stuck in the tired and boring culture wars. Still, it is stunning to see such a clear, precise criticism of the pope by a bishop.

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