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Abp Chaput's Sermon

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Distinctly Catholic

Last June, my colleague and friend Tom Roberts penned an essay comparing the two most famous seminary classmates in America, Boston's Cardinal Sean O'Malley, OFM Cap, and Philadelphia's Archbishop Charles Chaput, OFM Cap. That essay was much on my mind as I read +Chaput's closing sermon at the Vigil for Life and compared it with the sermon delivered the night before by +O'Malley. (h/t to Rocco for the text of the +Chaput sermon and you can find my comments on O'Malley's sermon by clicking here.) In the event, snow prevented +Chaput from making the trek to Washington and his sermon was read for him by the Rector of the Shrine, Msgr. Walter Rossi.

Roberts concluded his commentary by posing this question about the differing ecclesiastical styles of leadership posed by the two men: "Are we more likely to be attracted to the invitation into a life, a story if you will, of transformative love, rats and all, or one in which the criticism of our lives, beliefs, efforts and culture is relentless and without much hope?" That basic contrast was on display in the two sermons.

The most obvious difference to me was that while Cardinal O'Malley spent several minutes speaking about women facing crisis pregnancies, the fact that they feel "overwhelmed, alone, afraid, confused," like the woman caught in the act of adultery in the Gospel passage the congregation had just heard. He praised the work of crisis pregnancy centers that help women perceive the viable alternatives to abortion, and the efforts of groups like Project Rachel to comfort women who have had abortions. He urged the pro-life movement to reach out to mothers facing crisis pregnancies and he praised women who make the courageous act to offer the children they cannot rear up for adoption and the other courageous mothers who adopt those children. .

In his sermon, Archbishop Chaput had this to say about women facing a crisis pregnancy. Oh, wait. I forgot. He did not mention the plight of women in his sermon.

+Chaput did, of course, mention the unborn as did his confrere from Boston. And, I would like to stipulate that I am one hundred percent confident +Chaput does grieve the loss of the children killed by abortion and grasps the human tragedy involved. But, I cannot fail to note that in mentioning the unborn in his sermon, they appear less like people unnaturally deprived of life and more like a moral category. He wrote:

Seventy years ago, abortion was a crime against humanity. Four decades ago, abortion supporters talked about the ?tragedy? of abortion and the need to make it safe and rare. Not anymore. Now abortion is not just a right, but a right that claims positive dignity, the license to demonize its opponents and the precedence to interfere with constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech, assembly and religion. We no longer tolerate abortion. We venerate it as a totem.

This is all rather bloodless. Abortion is presented not as a problem because of the lives lost but because of what it says about our culture, because our nation has decided to break the moral law, because it now interferes with ?constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech, assembly and religion.? Is THAT the problem? In some sense, yes. But, it is not the problem a teenage girl who finds herself pregnant wrestles with, is it? In this telling ? and I repeat, that I am sure the Archbishop really does care about women and their children ? but in this telling, abortion is not a problem for the woman, not even for the baby. It is a problem for constitutional lawyers.

+Chaput did have some fine moments in his sermon. He writes:

Our lives matter to the degree that we give them away to serve God and to help other people. Our lives matter not because of who we are. They matter because of who God is. His mercy, his justice, his love ? these are the things that move the galaxies and reach into the womb to touch the unborn child with the grandeur of being human. And we become more human ourselves by seeing the humanity in the poor, the weak and the unborn child and then fighting for it.

This may be a little too Augustinian to persuade modern ears, but I like Augustine. And, I think more people are attracted to the faith when we do not try to make it "relevant" so much as when we point out the enormity of the claims our faith makes ? ?these are the things that move the galaxies and reach into the womb to touch the unborn child with the grandeur of being human? ? is an arresting phrase.

Still, the overall feeling of the sermon is a depressing one. Take the last sentences: ?If Jesus is the lord of the sabbath, he is also the lord of history. And sooner or later, despite the weaknesses of his friends and the strengths of his enemies, his will *will* be done ? whether the Pharisees and Herodians of our day approve of it or not.? If +Chaput has sent me this text in advance, which is not something likely I admit, I would have asked, ?Why give the last word to the Herodians?? This sermon was preached to a basilica full of young people, most of whom barely slept through the night, about to brave the wind and the cold. Why not a thought to warm them? Why not add, ?The Lord of the Sabbath. The Lord of History. The Lord who, today, is present here and now because we are gathered in His name.? Is there anything wrong with an uplifting finish?

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Sadly, I fear that in the worldview that has dominated +Chaput's writings, the answer to that last question is: Yes, there is something wrong with an uplifting finish. Just as there is something wrong with the palpable enthusiasm Pope Francis has generated, causing +Chaput to re-print some emails from disgruntled conservative Catholics. Just as, in Roberts' essay, +Chaput is seen to be incapable of assigning credit, only blame, to everyone and everything, the world, or at least our nation, is going to hell in a handbasket, and when asked if he discerns any signs of hope, replied, "I see some lights, but they're not many and they're small." His Grace needs to get out of his chancery, perhaps, hang up the phone on Robbie George or George Weigel or whoever is counseling him these days, drive up to North Philly and see the wonderful work Sr. Mary Scullion, or across the river to Camden and see the wonderful work of Fr. Doyle. There are plenty of lights, some small, some not so small, that are being lit every day by the flame of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the most mysterious person of the Trinity, to be sure. But, the Spirit is not a neo-conservative cultural critic.

This, finally, is the problem I have with Archbishop Chaput. He thinks his job as pastor is to be a cultural critic, and I think the job of a pastor is, first, to let his people know that he loves them, second, to connect his love for them with Jesus' love for us all, and third, to teach them the truths of the faith that flow from our understanding of this love. I know that the world is not all wine and roses. Nor is the history of the Church. As the Holy Father says, the world is often battle-scarred and the Church must serve as a field hospital. Sadly, the insular, depressive, detached cultural critiques offered by +Chaput are not spiritual bandages. They are more like Civil War-era medicine: The "cure" is as dangerous as the initial wound and happy is the man who dies on the battlefield rather than come under the scalpel of the surgeon.

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