

From the Boston Globe at Boston.com a very interesting interview with Archbishop Charles Chaput. A very telling comparison between those on the right and those on the left who disagree with him.

Chaput on Communion, and nasty e-mail

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Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Denver spent St. Patrick's Day lunch fielding questions from a group of journalists in Washington; I posted his opening remarks a few days back, in which he explained his position that politicians who support abortion rights should not present themselves for Communion, but also said that he does not deny Communion to those who seek it. Now the full transcript of the Q&A is available thanks to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, which hosted the lunch.

There are multiple interesting exchanges.

Sally Quinn, of On Faith, had a lengthy discussion with Chaput about her decision, as a non-Catholic, to take Communion at the Catholic funeral for Tim Russert. Quinn offered several different explanations for her action, saying at one point, "I wanted to do it because I wanted to see what it felt like, since I'm now – as you say, reporters should know about religion. I want to experience a lot of different religions," and saying at another point, "I felt very much like I wanted to do this for Tim. He was a very close friend of mine and it was a very emotional time." And then, she said: "It seems to me, listening to you and trying to understand who is really acceptable, it would seem that nobody should be able to take communion, given your guidelines, because everyone is a sinner. Everyone has scandal in their background; everyone has done something wrong. When I look at the people in a Catholic church, when I see them getting up and they are friends of mine – even at Tim Russert's funeral – whose consciences I know are not clear, I think why are those people allowed to take communion? I think about the Catholic priests who abused young children who still take communion. I think of those who knew about it and stayed silent and are still taking communion. How do you resolve those issues?"

Here is a portion of Chaput's response:

"The teaching of our church about Holy Communion isn't that you have to be perfect or that you even have to be good. It's that you have to be sorry for your sins and you have to believe what the church believes – not just about the Eucharist, whether it's the body and blood of Christ, but about what we believe as Catholics...

What I think the basic problem is most of the time, Sally, is that people think that they can make up their own meaning for the Eucharist – for me it means that I admire Catholics, and for me it means that I like Tim Russert. But that's not what the church means, and that's why we don't invite people to communion who don't share our faith. Catholics who don't believe what the Catholic Church believes shouldn't receive."

And then, another exchange between the two:

QUINN: Did you believe that the pope made a mistake by giving communion when he was here to Nancy Pelosi and John Kerry and those other Catholics?

CHAPUT: I've given communion to people who come up who aren't Catholics. We kind of joke that every time there's a funeral, you have a lot of first communions because you don't embarrass people when they come to communion and chase them away because that's a terrible pastoral decision. But to tell them beforehand that it's not appropriate unless you're a Catholic is appropriate.

So there are all kinds of different issues going on in your question. I don't think that my guidelines are mine; I don't think they're harsh. I think they're just what the church has always understood. Now people don't have to agree with us. If I don't agree, let's say, with an Evangelical church, I'll still respect what they ask of me when I'm there. And I think that those of you who aren't Catholics or who are non-believing Catholics or whatever, if you come to a Catholic church, it wouldn't be appropriate for you to receive communion out of respect for what the church believes. So this isn't about me being better than you or you being better than me; it's simply what our church believes and practices.

Another exchange that caught my attention came between Chaput and Patricia Zapor, of Catholic News Service, who asked the archbishop about the vitriolic nature of so much e-mail about Catholic issues -- something I experience in the comments on this blog.

This is what Chaput said:

"I used to get some hate mail before I was online, but not nearly as much as I did afterwards. I think the way that we have immediate access, which means we immediately speak out of our emotions rather than write a letter, send it the next day, you might change your mind. Instead you write it and you push the button to "show them," you know, that kind of thing.

So I think our immediate ability to communicate has led to a coarsening discourse for one thing. I gave a talk recently -- I think it may have been when I was in Toronto, where I said that the Lord reminds us that we are sheep among wolves, but it's important for us not to become wolves ourselves because of our experience, and I think that often happens.

Some of the worst emails I get are from Catholic conservatives who think I should excommunicate and refuse communion to Gov. Bill Ritter Jr. of Colorado and to former-Sen. [and now Secretary of the Interior] Ken Salazar of Colorado, and why aren't you doing this? I mean, just awful kind of stuff that they write. Sometimes, I must admit, that when I write back, I'm not as friendly as I should be. But I try not to be mean."

And then, reflecting on the difference between e-mail from liberals and conservatives, he said:

"The left mail I get will use terrible words but be less vitriolic. They use the F-word and things like that, call me names like that. But the right is meaner, but they're not as foul."

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