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Chaput commiserates with reporters

by Patricia Zapor by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- Denver Archbishop Charles J. Chaput commiserated with journalists who cover religion about the vitriolic hate mail they and he receive when they address topics such as who should receive the Eucharist.

In a March 17 round table with religion reporters sponsored by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in Washington, Archbishop Chaput spoke candidly about both his appreciation for writers who understand their topic and his frustration with others who don't do their homework before they attempt to explain church teachings and practices.

His prepared remarks touched briefly on the advertised topic of the session -- the political obligations of Catholics -- which was the subject of Archbishop Chaput's recent book, "Render Unto Caesar: Serving the Nation by Living Our Catholic Beliefs in Political Life."

A question-and-answer session that followed further elaborated on Catholics in public life, a subject on which Archbishop Chaput has written and spoken frequently, including recent addresses to Human Life International in Dublin, Ireland, and to an audience at the University of Toronto.

But the conversation with the two dozen reporters who were in the room or listening through an Internet connection also touched on the rancor that follows the archbishop and the journalists especially when they write on the topic of Catholic politicians who disagree with church teachings in some areas.

Sally Quinn, moderator of The Washington Post's religion blog, "On Faith," described being surprised at the quantity and level of anger in criticism that followed a column she wrote last June about receiving Communion during the funeral Mass of her good friend, journalist Tim Russert.

Quinn, who is not Catholic, said she didn't realize until later that she should not have gone to Communion

and that her action might be offensive to Catholics. She said her column triggered a stunning outpouring of often highly offensive comments on the Post's Web site as well as attacks in press releases, such as one from the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights.

Quinn explained that she then made a point of learning more about Catholic teaching on the Eucharist and the circumstances under which Catholics should receive Communion and that non-Catholics shouldn't. She also apologized to Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick, the retired archbishop of Washington who was the celebrant at Russert's funeral.

Considering the church's teaching that people should only present themselves for the sacrament when they are not conscious of serious sin, Quinn said, "it would seem that nobody should be able to receive Communion."

She asked Archbishop Chaput for his thoughts on her experience in light of his frequent writing and public comments about Catholic politicians who disagree with elements of church teaching but who continue to receive Communion.

Archbishop Chaput apologized to Quinn for the treatment she received. He explained that his policy is "you don't embarrass people when they come to Communion," so he does not question whether someone who presents herself for the sacrament should be there. That would apply to prominent Catholic politicians who support keeping abortion legal, for instance, and whom some bishops have said would be barred from Communion in their dioceses, said the archbishop.

However, if such a politician, for instance, Vice President Joe Biden, were to contact him before coming to a liturgy, Archbishop Chaput said he would encourage the politician to "come talk to me" about it first.

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He said it is up to individuals to know the church's teachings, to honestly evaluate their own actions and to refrain from receiving sacraments if their lives do not reflect how a Catholic should be living.

That unwillingness to step in and prevent people from receiving sacraments has brought him his own share of hate mail, as has his stand that people who don't live according to the church's teachings need to remove themselves from receiving its sacraments, said Archbishop Chaput.

His efforts to explain the church's teachings on the rights of migrants and how that applies to immigration law and policy also stirs people's emotions, he said.

Archbishop Chaput said the way the Internet allows people to immediately respond out of raw emotion to anything "has led to a coarsening of the dialogue" on many issues.

One difference between criticism from conservatives and liberals, he joked, is that "the conservatives are meaner, but the liberals' language is more foul."

Archbishop Chaput said he responds to nearly all the mail he receives, spending about three hours a day dealing with e-mail and other correspondence.

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