NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Archbishop as Media Analyst

Joe Feuerherd | Jul. 13, 2009 NCR Today

In the mid-1970s, Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput served as director of communications for the Capuchin Province of St. Augustine in Pittsburgh. Not exactly a media pressure cooker, but I suppose it gives him some competence in analyzing the work of the press. Which is what he did last week in a speech to Catholic business leaders of Legatus, an organization founded by pizza magnate Tom Monaghan.

Chaput began **his talk [1]**by describing a July 2 meeting among President Obama and members of the religious press.

?One of the more curious questions President Obama got came from a Catholic editor who asked if the president was ready to ?write off? America?s Catholic bishops, or at least some of them, because they so often seem critical of his views,? said Chaput. He continued, ?This sounds a bit like a court flatterer asking a disappointed Caesar if he was ready to ?write off? Peter and Paul. But of course, suggesting that sort of unhappy parallel wouldn?t be fair, at least to the president.?

I was the ?court flatterer? to whom the archbishop refers (which I guess, to dissect the archbishop?s tortured metaphor, fairly places Chaput in the Pauline and Petrine pantheon.) There were seven other members of the press there for the 45-minute meeting.

?All smart leaders try to use the news media to advance their agendas,? said Chaput. ?And depending on who the leader is ? John F. Kennedy comes to mind, but I could easily name others -- media professionals can be very eager to help,? said Chaput.

So, according to Chaput, it appears I was ?very eager to help? the president and hence asked my ?curious? question to further the administration?s agenda.

The charge is utter nonsense. And, for someone holding himself out as an informed media critic, it demonstrates near complete ignorance of how the press really works.

Some context: Eight religion writers were invited to what amounted to a mini-press conference with the president eight days prior to his meeting with Pope Benedict. Chaput at least got this right: ?As part of a White House press strategy to create good will before the president meets Pope Benedict XVI later this week, President Obama recently met with a variety of Catholic journalists and editors. His goal was a sensible one: to favorably influence American Catholic opinion through their Catholic publications.?

Knowing that our time was quite limited and that, at best, each of us would probably get one question to ask the president, my colleagues and I used the half hour we had prior to the president?s arrival to coordinate questions. The goal was to avoid redundancy and cover as much of the Catholic ground as possible.

As it happened, the president called on me to ask the first question. So I went for the elephant in the room ? what we in the journalism business refer to as news ? and asked if the president would ?write off? the leadership

of the US Catholic Church if they kept hammering him, as dozens did prior to his recent Notre Dame speech.

The goal of the question was not to ?help? the president. The objective, rather, was to solicit Obama?s views of the American Catholic hierarchy, which ? perhaps after the Republican National Committee and the National Rifle Association ? has been among his most vocal critics. Here?s **the story** **[2]**that resulted from the interview.

In fact, my dream was that he would use the opportunity to blast his critics in the Church (which presumably would not have been of ?help? to his administration). But the president is, as advertised, both too smart for that and, it seemed, genuinely interested in reaching out to people with whom he disagrees on significant issues.

Said Chaput: ?The news media, despite their claims of impartiality, and despite the good work they often do accomplish, are just as prone to prejudice, ignorance, bad craftsmanship and tribalism as any other profession. But unlike other professions, the press has constitutional protections.?

All of which is, of course, true. But take a look at those two sentences and substitute ?Catholic hierarchy? for ?news media? and ?the press,? and you?ll see that this is true for another constitutionally-protected estate.

Source URL (retrieved on *08/30/2014 - 22:57*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/archbishop-media-analyst

Links:
[1] http://www.archden.org/index.cfm/ID/2265
[2] http://ncronline.org/news/politics/obama-eyes-vatican-meeting-cites-areas-cooperation