

Good News for Seattle

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 16, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

The appointment of Joliet Bishop J. Peter [Sartain to Seattle](#) [1] is good news for the people of Seattle. How do I know this?

In my dining room here in Maryland, I have among my prized mementos a piece of slate with an etching of the Cathedral of St. Andrew in Little Rock, Arkansas on it. These were sold to raise money for the restoration of the church building, which is where I worshiped for the four months and one-half I lived in Little Rock at the end of 2003 and beginning of 2004. I could walk there from the house I was renting and, in fact, had it not been for the staff at the cathedral I might not have ever found that house. I had two dogs at the time, and had failed to find an apartment that would allow them. One late night, while surfing the web, I wondered where I would go to Mass in Little Rock, found the website for the Cathedral and, on a whim, emailed them asking if they knew any homes for rent that permitted dogs. In the event, the organist knew of precisely such a house and emailed back. I enjoyed the house, as did the dogs, and the organist let me play the magnificent new organ at the cathedral from time to time.

St. Andrew's was a lovely place to worship and part of that had to do with Bishop Sartain who would preside at important feasts. At Christmas, I recall him greeting my mother after Mass. She was in a wheelchair at the time, and as he leaned down to speak with her, he really focused. My mother was quite frail in her later years, and you really had to try to hear her. Bishop Sartain could have waved a blessing and moved on to the large number of people beyond, but he didn't. He engaged her, listened to her, and she felt very special.

Sartain's sermons were thoughtful, not too didactic or formal, conversational and accessible. His style of presiding at the liturgy was unobtrusive and the focus was rarely on himself. He seemed at times to be in a deep state of prayer, oblivious to all that was going on around him.

Conservatives often deride the adjective "pastoral," assuming it is somehow a euphemism for "liberal." When I think of pastoral, I think of bishops who actually listen to their people, who engage them, who take the time to interact and do not hide behind the trappings, and the psychological distance those trappings can invite, of their office. I do not know if the new Archbishop of Seattle is a good manager. I do not know if he is a good fundraiser. But, in the instances where I found him preaching and interacting with the flock, he struck me as a pastoral bishop. And, that is a good thing for the people of Seattle.

And, once again, Pope Benedict XVI has not appointed a bomb-thrower to a major see. For all the criticism being heaped upon him, Pope Benedict's appointments strike me as very balanced. Cardinal Pio Laghi, when he was the apostolic delegate and later nuncio to the U.S., used to say of the appointments of bishops, "One for us, one for them." By "us" he meant conservatives. This approach left a divided hierarchy, a fact that we in the U.S. are still wrestling with. But, Archbishop Sambi and Pope Benedict seem intent on appointing moderate men, men who walk down the center of the aisle, men who are not inclined to throw bombs from either the left or the right, men who take the time to lean down and engage a woman in her wheelchair at the end of Christmas Mass.

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