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Cardinal kills resolution to be nice to bishops

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Jan. 13, 2011 Bulletins from the Human Side

I started the year with a pseudo-noble promise to be more understanding and supportive of bishops, somewhat in the spirit of my father?s frequent advice about criticizing others: ?Leave the poor fellows alone; they?re doing the best they can.? He, however, did not use the word ?fellows.?

Then *NCR*?s John Allen issues an interview whose headline describes Chicago?s Cardinal Francis George as ?the U.S. bishops? thinker-in-chief,? asserting that, although New York?s Archbishop Timothy Dolan, George?s successor as their president, ?is now the face and voice of the U.S. bishops ? George is still their brain.?

Among the many encounters that convinced me that his is not the keenest crozier at the conclave, his first meeting with my wife, psychiatrist Sara Charles, stands out. His very first words to her were: ?I?ve looked into your book? -- *Authority: The Most Misunderstood Idea in America* -- ?and I?ll tell you where you?re wrong.?

?It?s too Jungian,? George began, but my wife cut him off: ?There is nothing Jungian in it. It?s based on the work of the Catholic philosopher, Yves Simon.?

?It is?? the startled George replied but did not wait for an answer.

My sense of his general openness to the world of ideas has been reinforced many times but perhaps never more tellingly than in his charge to a large group of Chicago priests last year that Robert McClory, the late Tim Unsworth, and I, ?hate the church.?

George warned that if any of his hearers repeated this judgment, he would deny that he ever made it.

This is on a par with the deep thinking that inspired him to say to Judge Ann Burke, then on the bishops? committee to look into the sex abuse scandal that broke in 2002, ?Why are you trying to destroy the church??

He didn?t wait for an answer then either.

So exactly what kind of thinking is George doing for the body of the American bishops, most of whom are, in fact, doing the best they can in the difficult circumstances of our times?

George?s responses to Allen are instructive. Asked about his own achievements in his three year term as head of the bishops, he replied: ?I don?t know if I was able to move the ball ??

Asked about ?conversations? on the role of the bishops -- one of his favorite concepts -- he replied: ?It depends on where you start.?? George likes the idea that bishops ?are taking possession of their own vocation in the Church.?

His clear thoughts on the American scene are also on display when asked about *Faithful Citizenship*, the bishops? document on Catholic civic obligations. George said: ?I don?t know that it worked well and therefore I don?t know what its future is.?

About the media, whose coverage of the sex abuse scandal he has criticized, George now says, ?It?s hard for me to judge.? Still, he complains that the media?s story hasn?t ?changed in fifteen or twenty years when in fact the response of the Church has changed mightily.?

So you think the last eight years have vindicated the policies the bishops adopted at Dallas? Did the cardinal pause, one wonders, before replying, ?It?s hard to say.?

The bishops, he claims, need a ?more nuanced response? to sex abusers, but -- ignoring the fact that on his own watch the abusive Chicago priest Daniel McCormack was reassigned to a parish where he abused more children -- George says a refined regulation would not include ?putting them [sex abusers] back?.It?s too dangerous.?

George is not exactly cutting intellectual notches in the thicket when, asked about bishops? accountability, he responds that ?when you get beyond the sexual activity and into the governance, where?s the accountability for that?? Got that?

The cardinal concludes, like a man who really believes that he has done a bang-up job with abusers and their victims: ?I don?t know what more people would want to be done??

Allen suggests that many Catholics would like to see Cardinal Law-like resignations from bishops who covered up or reassigned sex abusing priests.

George responds that Law -- who, as his great patron put him in line to become archbishop of Chicago as soon as he heard that Cardinal Bernardin had a fatal illness -- ?went into exile.? I guess so, but remaining on six powerful Roman congregations, being in charge of a prestigious basilica and living in splendid apartments does not sound like Elba to most people.

Allen gives him an opportunity to unveil the finely honed edge of his thinker-in-chief?s mind on bishops? accountability.

?It?s very hard,? George avers, ?to know what shape it should take.?

George seems enthusiastic in noting that the newly embraced vocation of the bishops means that ?the power to govern means the power to punish.?

Asked if he was surprised by New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan?s recent election as president of the U.S. bishops? over then-vice president Tucson Bishop Gerald Kicanas, thereby breaking the conference?s tradition of selecting its outgoing vice-president as its new president, George cuts right to the chase: ?Yes and no.?

George retires next year and he would like to spend time hearing confessions where, and here comes that word again, ?the conversations?are the most important conversations on the face of the planet.?

?I like to study,? the cardinal continues, ?and there are a lot of things I?d like to read that I never have. That may sound somewhat self-indulgent, but I?d like to read things I could share with others in some capacity??

Your witness. We have no further questions, but I do have to rethink a resolution.

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