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Chaput Cites Disunity Among Bishops on Canon 915

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 12, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

In a talk at Notre Dame [1], Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput was asked why Catholics were so divided over the issue of whether or not to deny communion to pro-choice politicians. His response:

> The reason ... is that there is no unity among the bishops about it...There is unity among the bishops about abortion always being wrong, and that you can't be a Catholic and be in favor of abortion -- the bishops all agree to that -- but there's just an inability among the bishops together to speak clearly on this matter and even to say that if you're Catholic and you're pro-choice, you can't receive holy Communion.

It would be more accurate to say that Chaput and very few other bishops interpret Canon 915 in such a way as to suggest that such denial of communion should be the norm, while the vast majority of bishops disagree.

The reasons for their disagreement is obvious: It is lousy theology. There are many reasons why someone might not support a certain piece of legislation that would restrict or criminalize abortion.

Chaput's simplistic approach is belied by the fact that he has never been able to suggest precisely what such anti-abortion legislation should look like. Would women who procured an abortion go to jail? If not, and only a fool would think our polity would tolerate women going to jail for this, what should the penalty be? Would abortion be considered simply as murder? Would the doctor go to jail or merely lose his or her license? These are not easy questions.

I have a suggestion for His Grace of Denver: Bring the subject up during your ad limina visit later this year. We do not have to speculate about Cardinal Levada's position: While serving as Archbishop of San Francisco, he did not follow the practice Chaput advises. But, neither has Pope Benedict, or Pope John Paul II before him.

The worst part of Chaput's comments, however, are these words, which are not verbatim quotes from Chaput but from the reporter:

> Archbishop Chaput said he and others have been trying to move the U.S. bishops' conference to speak clearly on this issue for a number of years. However, there is a fear, he said, that if they do so, the bishops might somehow disenfranchise the Catholic community from political life, making it difficult to get elected if a Catholic politician has to hold the church's position on issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage.

I have never met a bishop who entertains the "fear" Chaput suggests, and I need scarcely point out that Chaput's characterization makes those bishops who disagree with him appear as cowards. They are not cowards. They disagree with Chaput as to whether or not his understanding of Canon 915 constitutes sound theology and/or sound pastoral practice. But, as I say, bring it up at the ad limina.

I have no doubt that Chaput would find his position is not only a minority position among his fellow bishops, but that the Holy See will not be quick to endorse his stance either.

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