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Archbishop Chaput and Clericalism

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NCR Today

The new archbishop of Philadelphia can't complain that he didn't get to describe himself in most favorable terms in his lengthy interview in *NCR*.

It was his introduction to a wide audience and the portrait is glowing: smart as a whip, loving and humble, a brave spokesman for Catholic truth to dissenters who are, well, confused, without intending to be the least bit unkind.

He might be the one to put Humpty Dumpty together again in the Philadelphia archdiocese and otherwise reverse its fortunes, enchant the rest of the populace and exceed Benedict XVI's faith in him.

If it doesn't work out, however, the cause might be that he appears to carry too much of the baggage of clericalism.

In particular, he shows an irrepressible tendency to define the terms on which he will relate to those whom he believes are under his authority. He decides whether Catholic politicians deserve communion, for example, defending that view by declaring that he would meet privately to read the riot act before announcing it publicly. That doesn't include taking seriously what the alleged offender has to say.

The same proclivity to proclaim the whole truth without a shred of doubt also came into play in his fiat that children of gay or lesbian couples wouldn't be allowed in Denver's Catholic schools, a move widely seen as a rebuke to Boston's archbishop who allowed such children to enroll.

A similar pattern pertains to Chaput's handling of sexual abuse cases. He has expressed sorrow for the victims but balks at acknowledging the church's responsibility for harboring criminals. He favors cooperation with the civil law but reserves a right to determine whether the laws that implicate offending

priests are fair enough to justify that cooperation.

He is, in brief, The Definer who believes moral doctrine need no discussion, let alone from the unordained.

His response to the recent report on the child sex abuse crisis was to endorse it's conclusion that the major factor was not the church but the wild and woolly 60s that led priests astray. Others argue that clericalism itself and the assumptions of clerical privilege were mostly to blame.

The Decider applies absolute truths to politicians and lesbian parents and to victims of abuse. There is nothing whatever wrong with our message or the institution that preaches it: you just need clarification and encouragement to be right.

Chaput says nobody could love Philadelphia more than he will, and I hope so (though I didn't think he looked good in his obligatory appearance in a Phillies cap). But the way I understand love is that it involves thinking the loved one has something valid to say.

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