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

Chaput and the church's evangelical coming out party

Jamie Manson | Aug. 8, 2011 Grace on the Margins

The recent bid by the Orange diocese on the Crystal Cathedral may be a more than a sign of a flamboyant edifice complex.

It may be a crystal clear signal that the Roman Catholic church in the U.S., which continues to exhibit stronger and stranger evangelistic tendencies, is finally coming out as the evangelical institution that it apparently longs to be.

One could point to a number of hints that the church might be forming some unhealthy attachments to fundamentalists. The Catholic and evangelical joint venture to combat same-sex marriage through their alleged funding of the National Organization for Marriage (NOM) might be a good starting point.

But the crowning evangelistic achievement, of course, is the recent selection of Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver as chief shepherd of the Philadelphia archdiocese. Traditional and progressive Catholics alike declared the appointment a victory for the new evangelical Catholic movement in the United States.

Chaput is considered the leading figure in the New Evangelism ? a movement that is supposed to take American Catholicism by storm with its strict fidelity to "the Gospel" and an uncompromising zeal for thrusting itself into political discourse. Chaput's manifesto, *Render Unto Caesar: Serving the Nation by Living our Catholic Beliefs in Political Life*, details this evangelistic call to arms.

It's no accident that, in addition to addressing Catholic institutions, Chaput can also be heard at Evangelical venues, such as Houston Baptist University where he told the audience:

> "The vocation of Christians in American public life does not have a Baptist or Catholic or Greek Orthodox or any other brand-specific label. . . . Our job is to love God, preach Jesus Christ, serve and defend God's people, and sanctify the world as his agents. To do that work, we need to be one. Not "one" in pious words or good intentions, but *really one, perfectly one*, in mind and heart and action, as Christ intended."

Among those most excited about Chaput's appointment is George Weigel. Sounding a bit too much like a counselor at a Vacation Bible School, Weigel declared Chaput's Denver diocese as "arguably the model Evangelical Catholic diocese in the country: a Church brimming with excitement over the adventure of the Gospel."

But looking at Chaput's record, one wonders whether the Archbishop isn't treating the Gospel more like a "choose your own adventure" book than as Scripture.

Chaput is notorious for disinviting baptized Catholics from the Eucharistic table, based solely on their political stance on abortion. He was also instrumental in the firing of Australian Bishop William Morris for writing that the church "may well need to be much more open towards other options for ensuring that Eucharist may be

celebrated." He defended a priest who expelled a girl from her Catholic grammar school because her parents are a lesbian couple.

Anyone who has read the Gospels knows that Jesus never speaks about homosexuality, traditional family values, abortion, or ordination. And, yet, listening to Chaput and his evangelistic ilk, one would think that the Gospels offer explicit teachings on these issues.

Of course, like many evangelicals, Chaput gives little attention to the themes that arise constantly in the Gospels: Jesus' teachings on the arrogance and hypocrisy of religious authorities; Jesus' unconditional invitation to his table; the role that religious and political leaders played in putting Jesus, God's incarnation, to death.

But given the continued mass exodus of baptized Roman Catholics from the church, one cannot fault Chaput for having evangelical tendencies. The hierarchy has watched so many baptized Catholic blatantly ignore their teachings and walk away from their parishes. Perhaps by adopting some of the successful strategies of the evangelical movement, men like Chaput are hoping they can revive the church's power in American society.

In the past 30 years, evangelicals have proven that nothing cures feelings of powerlessness among the clergy like divisive, religiously-charged, political opinion-making.

Though it may be hard to imagine now, evangelicals had no role in politics before the late 1970s. They didn't even have a formal stance on abortion. Evangelical pastors didn't begin engaging in contentious, political battles until they noticed that they were losing their influence over their Christian congregations to the changing culture of the late 1960s.

They entered political life, of course, with the abortion issue. The evangelical pro-life movement gave birth to Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, an organization that is largely credited with electing Ronald Reagan. Suddenly, small town preachers began to realize that they had a new calling as power brokers for some very high-profile politicians.

A few years later, they widened the target of their moral indignation to include homosexuality. Few would dispute that evangelicals are responsible for making same-sex marriage, to quote Chaput, "the issue of our time."

The visibility that evangelicals gained through their intermingling with politics has helped to pour hundreds of thousands of newly converted Christians into megachurches and hundreds of millions of dollars into church coffers.

While I do not question Archbishop Chaput's love of his interpretation of the Gospel and his devotion to his understanding of the church, one cannot but wonder whether the triumph of the evangelical movement isn't also fanning the flames of his New Evangelism.

Chaput may have been a force in Denver, but is it comparable to the influence exerted by his Colorado Springs neighbor James Dobson's mammoth Focus on the Family enterprise? Men like Dobson can change elections. Lately, Roman Catholic clerics seem to be losing political fights at every turn.

Re-reading John Allen's commentary (http://ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/him-or-not-denvers-chaput-very-21st-century-bishop) on Chaput in March of last year, one gets the sense that the Archbishop is familiar with the empowerment and visibility that come with speaking loudly and moralistically about issues in the public square:

> "Usually seen as a strong conservative, Chaput can be polarizing because he takes clear positions and defends them with relish. He's consequential in somewhat the same way as politicians and pundits with

bold views and the nerve not to pull their rhetorical punches: Love 'em or hate 'em, they're hard to ignore."

In addition to attempting to emulate the evangelical rise to political power and prominence, perhaps the Catholic hierarchs of the New Evangelism also hope to recoup the multitude of sheep that they have lost to evangelical churches over the past few decades. Studies suggest that nearly two-thirds of Catholics who leave the church for Protestant denominations join an evangelical church.

Whatever the motivation, Chaput and the New Evangelists need to face one stark fact: Even evangelicals cannot crack the code to keeping young adults in church. According to a recent study conducted by the Barna Group, nearly 70 percent of young evangelicals stop attending church when they enter adulthood. These statistics are only slightly more promising than the retention rate of young adults in the Roman Catholic church.

The irony, of course, is that young adults, whether evangelical or Catholic, aren't falling away from the church because of a lack of faith in God. According to Stephen Prothero, a scholar of religion at Boston University, "one reaction against the entanglement of religion and politics, especially for young people, has been to disengage from both political and religious institutions. There seems to be something a little unseemly about both of them."

New generations of Catholics and evangelicals, as well as many of their elders, long for spiritual guidance, but not moralistic religious ideology. Many seek to live out Jesus' teachings to serve the poor and vulnerable, but do not see rancorous political battles as a way to fulfilling the example that Jesus modeled.

Chaput may view the spiritual desires of young Catholics as evidence of a "tepid faith." But if he continues in this evangelical vein, he may find that future generations of Catholics are even more turned off by this current movement in Catholicism than previous generations were by the old church. The New Evangelism may end up stirring little more than a newer, deeper crisis in Roman Catholicism in the United States.

If such a crisis does emerge, Catholic evangelicals should take their own advice and seek answers in the words of the Bible.

They might start with a passage from Galatians 6:7, which reminds us: "You reap whatever you sow."

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

Editor's Note: We can send you an e-mail alert every time Jamie Manson's column, "Grace on the Margins", is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: **E-mail alert sign-up** [1]. If you already receive e-mail alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add "Grace on the Margins" to your list.

Source URL (retrieved on *03/11/2014 - 03:22*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/grace-margins/chaput-and-churchs-evangelical-coming-out-party

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup