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Chaput takes the reins in Philly

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Archbishop Charles J. Chaput receives applause during his Mass of installation at the Cathedral Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul in Philadelphia Sept. 8. (CNS photo/Nancy Wiechec)

PHILADELPHIA -- Archbishop Charles J. Chaput was installed yesterday as leader of the 1.5-million strong Archdiocese of Philadelphia, placing the outspoken culture warrior at the helm of a once tight-knit bastion of American Catholicism that now faces a series of crises.

From a damning clergy sex abuse scandal to a strike by Catholic school teachers, the 66-year-old Chaput has his work cut out in restoring the spirits of Philadelphia?s faithful while not backing down from debates on hot-button issues like gay marriage and abortion.

But Chaput, who spent the last 14 years as archbishop of Denver, seemed to relish the challenge, combining both tasks with characteristic confidence in his homily at Thursday?s installation Mass.

?This church in Philadelphia faces very serious challenges these days,? Chaput told an audience of 1,700 that filled the Byzantine-style Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul. ?There?s no quick fix to problems that are so difficult, and none of us here today, except the Lord himself, is a miracle worker.?

?But it?s important to remember and to believe that the church is not defined by her failure,? he continued. ?And you and I are not defined by our critics, or by those who dislike us. What we do in the coming months and years to respond to these challenges?that will define who we really are.?

A scathing grand jury report last February accused church officials of routinely sheltering child abusers in the past, and perhaps even up to the present day. The scandal led Chaput?s predecessor, Cardinal Justin Rigali, to suspend more than two dozen priests and to submit his own resignation in July.

The scandal resulted in a string of arrests, including a high-ranking church official who was charged with child endangerment for allegedly transferring predator priests to new parishes. Chaput will eventually have to wrestle with an investigatory report by a former prosecutor appointed by Rigali.

?No bishop will try harder to help persons who have been hurt by the sins of the past,? Chaput vowed.

Meanwhile, high school teachers in Catholic schools are on strike, looking for better pay and greater protections under the likelihood that Catholic schools will be closed. Rita Schwartz, head of the Catholic teachers association, said she did not blame Chaput for the labor strife.

?It?s not his fault we?re out here,? she said as she and a hundred other teachers picketed the archdiocesan offices behind the cathedral before the installation Mass.

Schwartz said she was encouraged that four days of negotiations had been scheduled with church school officials, starting Thursday afternoon. ?I?m hoping?there?s always hope,? she said.

But even after the strike is settled, Chaput will be forced to confront dwindling enrollment, rising costs and a downsizing trend that is increasingly common across large East Coast dioceses?a dynamic that Chaput did not have to confront in the bustling Archdiocese of Denver.

Chaput is also likely to have a higher profile in the East Coast media market, and receive greater scrutiny for his frequent remarks and writings on issues like gay marriage (?The issue of our time,? he says), abortion rights and what he calls the perilous American drift into secularism and moral relativism.

In a crucial swing state with a bevy of Catholic voters, Chaput told The Associated Press on Tuesday that if Catholic politicians who support abortion rights ?don?t believe what the church teaches, they?re not really Catholic.?

Those are the kind of remarks that have dismayed more progressive Catholics who say Chaput and other bishops should worry more about pastoral concerns than politics, especially given the ongoing sexual abuse scandal.

?Until this task is accomplished, Chaput would be well-advised to leave politics aside,? wrote Nicholas Cafardi, a former chairman of a national church sex abuse review board, in Thursday?s Philadelphia Daily News. ?Issuing divisive political rebukes will only undermine his ability to minister to a city in desperate need of healing.?

Yet in his homily on Thursday, Chaput unapologetically indicated that his outspokenness was simply part of his job.

?It?s crucial for those of us who are bishops not simply to look like bishops but truly to be bishops,? he said, going on to cite St. Augustine?s fourth-century admonition about the elevated role of a bishop. ?Otherwise, we?re just empty husks.?

Whatever the impending difficulties, Chaput, a Kansas native who is a member of the Capuchin order of the Franciscans, said he was determined to make his new relationship with Philadelphia work. He drew laughs when he compared his appointment to an ?arranged marriage,? calling Pope Benedict XVI ?the matchmaker.?

?The good news is that romance is a modern invention?and given the divorce rate common today, not everything it?s cranked up to be,? Chaput told his new flock in the City of Brotherly Love. ?In fact, history suggests that arranged marriages often worked at least as well as those based on romantic love.?

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