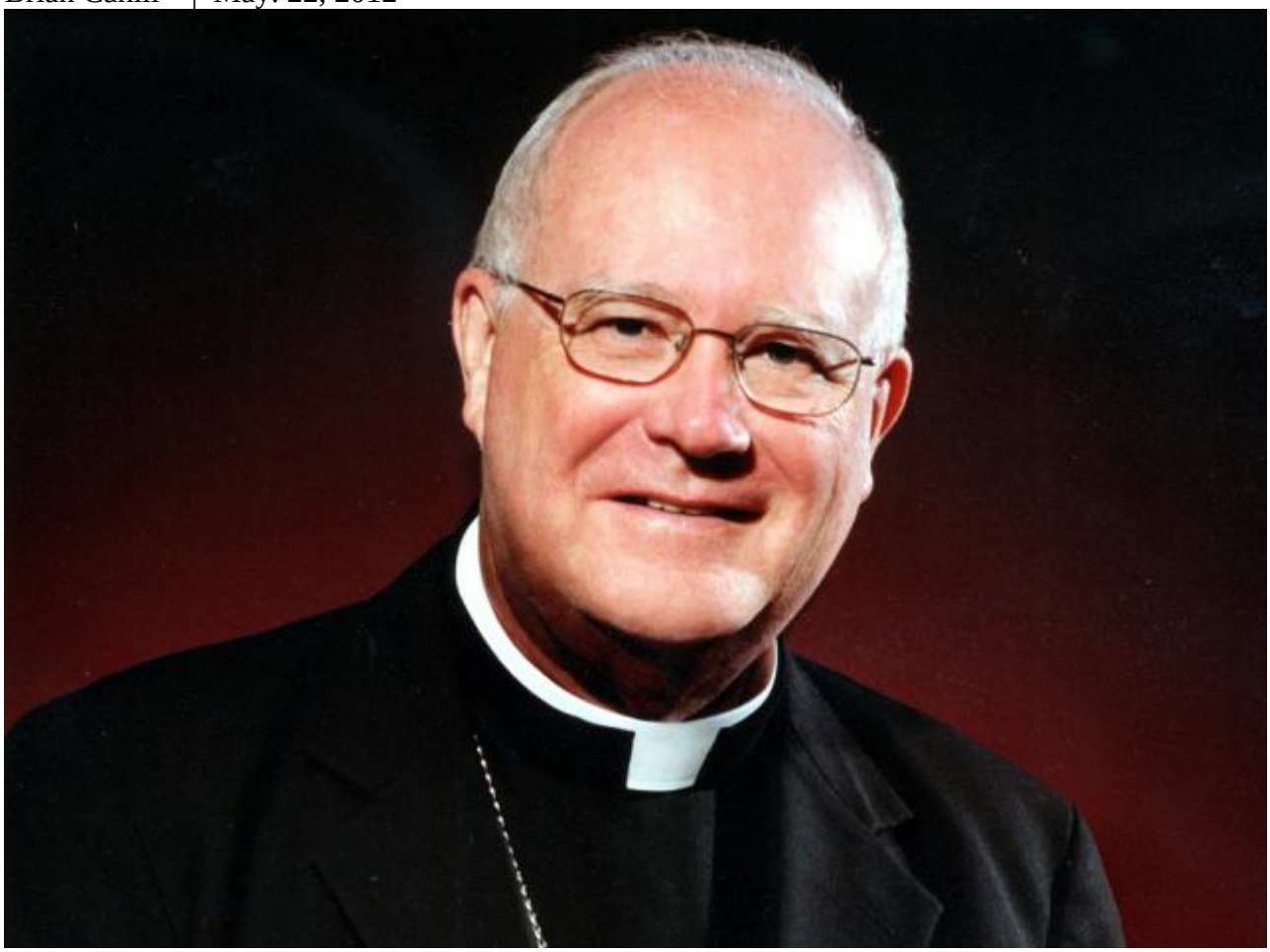
NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

LCWR the 'elephant in the room' at celebration of San Francisco archbishop

Brian Cahill | May. 22, 2012



San Francisco Archbishop George H. Niederauer (CNS/Catholic San Francisco)

COMMENTARY

San Francisco Catholic Charities honored Archbishop George Niederauer at its annual Loaves and Fishes event April 29. While he was being honored for his leadership and support of Catholic Charities programs and services, it was obvious that everyone at the banquet, regardless of where they come down on religious liberty, women religious, gay marriage or any of the other hot issues within our church wanted also to honor this good man for his most important role -- being the pastor and shepherd of his flock.

The main speaker of the evening was his friend and predecessor Cardinal William Levada.

I have always loved the phrase "elephant in the room," a metaphor for an obvious truth or controversial issue momentarily unaddressed. The elephant in the Grand Ballroom of the Palace Hotel that night was Rome's recent

crackdown on the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, perhaps initiated by bishops in America, but led by William Levada, the Prefect of the Congregation for the Protection of the Faith.

On the following Monday, Niederauer celebrated his 50th anniversary as a priest. Levada was the homilist at the Mass. There were pickets outside with signs that read, "Support our nuns." Once again, the elephant was in the room, only this time, the room was St. Mary's Cathedral.

In his homily, Levada paid appropriate tribute to the archbishop's years as a seminary teacher, spiritual director and rector. In that understandable context, he quoted from the first epistle of Peter, where the writer speaks to the presbyters and says, "Tend the flock of God in your midst ... do not lord it over those assigned to you, but be examples to the flock." As a priest and bishop, Niederauer has clearly followed that admonition. But as I sat there, I wondered if Levada recognized the irony of those words coming from his own lips, the lips of the man leading the charge against the majority of American Catholic nuns and inadvertently moving Catholic bishops further down the road toward ridicule, irrelevance and obsolescence.

And as I looked at the altar and saw Archbishop John R. Quinn, another former archbishop of San Francisco (1977-1995), I recalled his prescient article [2] in *America* magazine a few years ago, articulating the public duties of bishops. He described the pitfalls of bishops functioning as partisan political actors, revving up the culture wars and exclusively focusing on abortion and gay marriage. He wrote, "The church has to be on speaking terms with the human society in which it lives." He urged bishops "to make an approach to people, seeking and promoting dialogue with them." In the spirit of truth and charity, "they should present their positions in clear language, unaggressively and diplomatically."

Quinn speaks from a tradition well exemplified by Cardinal Joseph Bernadin and other bishops of that era, who understood that part of being an effective shepherd and moral leader includes a willingness and capacity to manage the tension between church teaching and how the church must function in a pluralistic society.

To his credit, Levada, in his San Francisco days, gave evidence that he understood that role. Unfortunately, somewhere in his transition to being a full-time Roman, it appears he lost that perspective.

It is clear that a number of bishops have not read Quinn's article, evidenced by the tone-deafness [3] of David Zubik of Pittsburgh, the inflammatory rhetoric [4] of Daniel Jenky of Peoria, Ill., the harsh autocracy of Thomas Olmstead of Phoenix, the sarcasm of William Lori of Bridgeport, the fondness for loyalty oaths of Robert Vasa of Santa Rosa, Calif., the "sky is falling" reaction to gay marriage of Salvadore Cordileone of Oakland, Calif., and the snide humor of Timothy Dolan of New York.

I disagreed with Niederauer on Proposition 8, and he has followed the party line on religious liberty and contraception. However, while he upholds the teachings of the church, his first response is always that of a warm and compassionate pastor. He is a shepherd, and as such, he has retained his credibility as a teacher and moral authority as a leader. Unlike some of his counterparts, he does not lord it over anyone.

It is not the first time in the history of our church that some our leaders have spectacularly and tragically failed. And it is not the first time that church leaders have squandered their teaching influence and their moral authority. It remains to be seen whether American bishops will come to realize that aggressiveness, arrogance, disrespect, harshness, hyperbole, irresponsibility and insensitivity do not win hearts and minds. What is painfully clear is that if bishops cannot figure out how to effectively function in our pluralistic society, then they cannot effectively preach the message of Jesus in our society. And if they can't do that, what good are they?

[Brian Cahill is the former executive director of San Francisco Catholic Charities.]

The Next Step FORWARD

[5]

DONATE NOW [5]

Enjoy this article?
Help support more like it by **donating today!** [5]

Source URL (retrieved on *05/05/2015 - 19:55*): http://ncronline.org/news/women-religious/lcwr-elephant-room-celebration-san-francisco-archbishop

Links:
[1] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/in-content
[2] http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=11841
[3] http://ncronline.org/node/29672
[4] http://ncronline.org/node/29911/
[5] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/article-end