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Right wing 'generally not happy' with Francis, Chaput says

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 23, 2013 NCR Today
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Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia is renowned for speaking plainly, which in part means he's often willing to say things out loud that others in his position may sense but are hesitant to acknowledge.

During an interview in Rio de Janeiro on Tuesday, for instance, Chaput bluntly tackled three questions about Pope Francis, his early record, and his current trip to Brazil:

- The 68-year-old Capuchin conceded that last night's mob scene with the papal motorcade was a "frightening moment," hinting that perhaps Francis could listen a bit more to handlers charged with his safety and saying, "There has to be some distance between the crowds and the Holy Father."
- Chaput acknowledged that members of the right wing of the Catholic church "generally have not been really happy" with some aspects of Francis' early months and said the pope will have to find a way "to care for them, too."
- Chaput defended Francis on concerns in some circles that he's been silent on abortion, gay marriage and euthanasia, saying, "I can't imagine he won't be as pro-life and pro-traditional marriage as any of the other popes." He insisted the bishop of Rome "has to talk about those things."

Chaput is in Rio de Janeiro leading a delegation of roughly 40 pilgrims from the Philadelphia archdiocese to the July 23-28 World Youth Day. He said turnout might have been larger had it not been for concerns about safety, which, he said, led some dioceses in Pennsylvania to "actively discourage" people from coming.

Chaput is also scheduled to deliver one of the English-language catechetical sessions later this week. He sat down with *NCR* at the Rio hotel where most of the American bishops and World Youth Day personnel are staying.

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How many people are here from Philadelphia?

We have just a little over 40 people, so it's a very small group.

Was it finances that held attendance down?

I don't think it's so much that. I think there's been a sense across Pennsylvania, actually, that this might be a dangerous place for young people to come. I know that a number of dioceses in Pennsylvania actively discouraged their young people from coming and didn't sponsor diocesan pilgrimages on purpose.

Was that the case all along, or was it a reaction to the big protests in June?

It's been the case from the beginning, from the time of the announcement. There was fear that it would pose a

risk to people's health and well-being by coming to Rio de Janeiro.

I suppose the protests didn't help.

I think it kind of made people feel they were justified in their concerns.

For those who are here, I presume they were planning to come before Francis was elected, but what do you get from them in terms of reactions to the new pope?

Anytime anybody sees a pope for the first time, it's an extraordinary moment in their lives. For those who are seriously Catholic, it's even more so. It would be hard for me to judge if this group thinks any differently about it than they would have if Pope Benedict were here. After the fact, I'll let you know, because that's when we'll really get a sense of what people think of Pope Francis.

I think the kind of person who makes the sacrifice to get here really sees it as a pilgrimage rather than an adventure to see one figure. Of course, if the pope weren't here, people wouldn't come, either. He's at the center of the church, and he's at the center of this event. Thanks be to God that the Lord has given us a pope with such universal appeal to so many people.

What do you pick up back home about the new pope?

My sense is that practicing Catholics love him and have a deep respect for him, but they're not actually the ones who really talk to me about the new pope. The ones who do are nonpracticing Catholics or people who aren't Catholic or not even Christian. They go out of their way to tell me how impressed they are and what a wonderful change he's brought into the church. It's interesting to see that it's the alienated Catholic and the non-Catholic and the non-Christians who have expressed their enthusiasm more than Catholics have. It's not that Catholics aren't impressed, too, but they're ordinarily impressed with the pope.

How do you explain the enthusiasm beyond the usual suspects?

I don't know how to interpret it, quite honestly. I think part of it is genuine appreciation for the pope's extraordinary friendliness and transparency. But also, I think they would prefer a church that wouldn't have strict norms and ideas about the moral life and about doctrine, and they somehow interpret the pope's openness and friendliness as being less concerned about those things. I certainly don't think that's true. I think he's a truly Catholic man in every sense of the word, but I think people are hoping that he'll be less concerned about the issues that separate us today.

Do you think there will be a moment of reckoning when the honeymoon wears off?

We'll see what happens. The pope may have a way of managing all of that will be extraordinary, I don't know. I would think that by virtue of his office, he'll be required to make decisions that won't be pleasing to everybody.

This is already true of the right wing of the church. They generally have not been really happy about his election, from what I've been able to read and to understand. He'll have to care for them, too, so it will be interesting to see how all this works out in the long run.

Commentators have pointed out that during his first 120 days, Francis hasn't used the words "abortion," "gay marriage" and "euthanasia." Is that troubling to you?

I don't know how anybody can make judgments so quickly about a pontificate on any of those things. I think the pope has spoken very clearly about the value of human life. He hasn't expressed those things in a combative way, and perhaps that's what some are concerned about, but I can't imagine that he won't be as pro-life and pro-

traditional marriage as any of the other popes have been in the past.

Some read his remarks to the Italian bishops to mean he's going to let local bishops deal with those issues rather than doing it himself. Is that your understanding?

I think what he said to the Italian bishops is that he's not going to become involved in political issues. For me, issues such as abortion and the meaning of marriage aren't political issues; they're doctrinal and moral. We all as bishops, including the bishop of Rome, have to talk about those things. It would be very strange to think you can make that separation. It usually comes from those who want to claim that those two issues are political, which is often what happens in the States. We're told to keep our nose out of politics, when really, our nose is in morality.

That usually means staying out of politics someone doesn't like, correct?

Sure. The church has been clear on universal health care, on immigration, and we don't get criticized from the left on those issues but from the right. On abortion and the meaning of marriage, the left criticizes us and the right is very pleased. I think a bishop worth his salt takes up all the teachings of the church and doesn't play to a crowd but plays to the truth.

You mention immigration. What did you make of the pope's visit to Lampedusa?

I thought it was wonderful. It was very touching moment. I hope it leads to concrete results, because you just never know if they really do. I think it was something that touched the heart of anybody who paid attention, especially those of who are in favor of reasonable immigration laws.

Did you watch any of the motorcade last night?

No, but a lot of people have been commenting about it. The people I've talked to were horrified by what happened. They talked about their families back home calling them, being very concerned about the safety of the pope. I think it's very important for all us who are in public life to listen to our handlers, who take care of our security. It seemed like a frightening moment. It would be a disaster for the church if something happened to the Holy Father, and it would be a huge embarrassment to the people of Brazil. There has to be some distance between the general crowds and the Holy Father just to protect him.

You've been coming to World Youth Day for a long time. Aside from the obvious thing, a new pope, do you detect anything striking about this one?

I'm pleased with the numbers I see, though it's too early to know. The issues that will come up right away are the details ... how long the waits are, how well organized or not it is, and so on. I ran into trouble right away when I got here and found out that I didn't have a room in any of the hotels! I hope it doesn't continue like that.

What's your read on how effective WYD is in developing vocations?

I can give you a better read on that from Denver, where quite a number of them started with WYD. When I was in Denver, many priests from around the country would come up to me and say that's where their vocation began. It has the potential to do great things.

In Denver, what percentage of your priests would be WYD priests?

I think 10 percent. In Philadelphia, I don't have any idea. Only two of our current seminarians are here. Of course, we don't have any money to send them as a diocese, so they get invited to be a chaperone or something for a group, and there aren't that many groups coming.

If you do the math, 10 percent of the total of priests is not a bad number.

No, it's not, and if we were 10 percent less than we are, it would be pretty bad. Of course, God's will works in different ways, and perhaps God would have found a different occasion to call them.

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