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Not a happy day in Hartford

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Distinctly Catholic

"Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you," we read in 1 Peter 3:15. We are called to be "a people of hope." Some days, watching and listening to Pope Francis, being hopeful comes easy, even naturally.

Today is not one of those days. In naming Bishop Leonard Blair to become the next archbishop of Hartford, Conn., the Holy See has sent what can only be described as a counter-sign. This was a missed opportunity to send a signal to all the bishops in the United States that the Holy Father is calling for a different style of pastoral leadership in the Church. In June, Pope Francis spoke to the nuncios from around the world assembled in Rome. He sketched the type of pastoral leadership he expected in the appointment of bishops. The pope said he wanted pastors who would serve their people, not serve as overlords. They were, he famously said, to be men who "have the smell of the sheep."

The good news is that Archbishop-designate Blair has the smell of the sheep. The bad news is that one suspects he thinks the sheep stink.

Archbishop-designate Blair served his tour of duty at the Vatican as a top aide to Cardinal Edmund Szoka. It is time for the nuncios of the world, and for the Congregation for Bishops especially, to ask themselves this question: What exactly about serving at a desk in the Vatican inclines one to think the person would make a good pastor? Certainly, a tour of duty creates a network of friends in high places and generates a familiarity with the "court" atmosphere and a suppleness at navigating the Byzantine, sometimes Kabuki-like, methods that have ruled in those frescoed halls. One would be hard-pressed to make the case that it inoculates one to clericalism, which Pope Francis has pronounced a scourge on the life of the Church.

Archbishop-designate Blair is most well-known on the national stage for conducting the doctrinal

investigation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). As regular readers will recall, I have no sympathies with some of the theological silliness that has been given a microphone at the LCWR's annual meetings. But at the end of the day, who really cares if our sisters take one weekend a year and listen to some goofy talks? The other 51 weeks of the year, they are out doing the Lord's work.

In that doctrinal assessment, +Blair specifically criticized NETWORK, the lobbying organization run by religious women on behalf of the poor. Full disclosure: Sr. Simone Campbell, the executive director of NETWORK, is a dear friend of mine. In the doctrinal assessment, he singled out NETWORK for paying insufficient attention to the issues of abortion and same-sex marriage. Of course, that was before Pope Francis said the Church should not only be "obsessed" with those issues and made helping the poor, not just through charity but through conversion of culture, a leitmotif of his papacy.

At the time of the controversy surrounding the University of Notre Dame's invitation to President Barack Obama to speak at their graduation ceremonies, +Blair joined those who denounced the decision. He wrote:

President Obama is our elected President, and we should give him all the honor and respect due to his office. We should also pray for him, especially for a change of mind and heart on his part, away from abortion to protection of unborn human life. **An invitation to speak and an honorary doctorate from a Catholic University go beyond the bounds of respect, and can only be a source of dismay.**

I wasn't dismayed.

The LCWR and Notre Dame brouhahas were not the only instances in which +Blair showed a certain lack of delicacy, a certain penchant for the culture warrior type of episcopal leadership. He was at the forefront of the effort to convince Catholics not to donate funds to the Komen Foundation for cancer research and prevention because they funded mammograms at a variety of health clinics, including those run by Planned Parenthood. I am no fan of Planned Parenthood and I am deeply opposed to embryonic stem cell research, which was also one of the concerns raised about the Komen Foundation. But, +Blair's statement at the time reflects something about his style of episcopal leadership that I find deeply troubling. He wrote:

For some time, moral questions have been raised from various quarters about the research funded by the Komen Foundation. The Bishops of Ohio have discussed this and have looked into the matter. As best we can determine, at present the Komen Foundation does not fund cancer research that employs embryonic stem cells. However, their policy does not exclude that possibility. They are open to embryonic stem cell research, and may very well fund such research in the future. They are also contributors to Planned Parenthood, which, though it may claim to provide needed medical services to poor women, is also the largest provider of abortions in our country.

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In order to avoid even the possibility of cooperation in morally unacceptable activities, the other Bishops and I believe that it would be wise to find alternatives to Komen for Catholic fundraising efforts.

There is a tone of fear running through those words, a fear that found its way into the speech by Archbishop John Nienstedt at the Napa Institute that I called attention to yesterday. This fear is understandable, but it is also crippling. One of the wonderful things about Pope Francis is his fearlessness, no? He has said again and again: Go out into the world, get out of the sacristies, do not be hidebound by the "small-minded rules," and do not be so afraid of making mistakes. Get out and be with the people, especially the poor. The Lord will be with you; indeed, in the midst of the poor, you will always find the Lord. I find none of the pope's eager hopefulness in +Blair's dark warnings about what the Komen Foundation "might" do "in the future."

I cannot refrain from expressing the concern -- dare I say it, the fear -- that this lack of delicacy is going to come back and bite the Church in the behind. In 2012, largely through the efforts of the Catholic Church, a referendum on physician-assisted suicide was narrowly defeated at the polls in Massachusetts. The supporters of physician-assisted suicide will not give up. They will move on. They have already passed legislation in Vermont. You can bet they will soon target Connecticut. And who can doubt that Archbishop-designate Blair's culture warrior style will play right into the hands of those who wish to attack the human dignity of the old and the suffering? People of hope. People of hope. People of hope. Let us hope that +Blair catches some of the fever of Pope Francis -- and some of the credibility of Pope Francis -- before we must face that fight in Connecticut.

I am hesitant to criticize Pope Francis for this appointment. I doubt he knows personally any of the names on the terna that came to him. But I hope someone, somehow, will let the pope know that his appointments in the U.S. so far have not reflected the vision of leadership in the Church he exhibits himself or speaks publicly about as a felt need. One friend this morning asked these questions: Do you think +Blair could have given the speech that Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga gave in Dallas last weekend? Do you think he could have even sat through the speech? Pope Francis must come to realize that so long as appointments are being made on the recommendations of Cardinals Raymond Burke and James Harvey, and apparently with the blessing of Cardinal Marc Ouellet, those appointments risk sending a counter-sign to the people, clergy and bishops of the United States.

Let us all pray for Archbishop-designate Blair. Let us hope that he and his brother bishops will recognize in Pope Francis' electrifying way of approaching his office something that should encourage them to follow the pope's lead. It is hard to imagine our culture warriors saying the things the pope says but perhaps, over time, the evident success the pope has in conveying the Gospel will rub off. If they cannot acquire the smell of the sheep, perhaps they can acquire the smell of the pope.

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