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New Bridgeport bishop reaches out through simplicity, dialogue

Brian Roewe | May. 27, 2014
Bridgeport, Conn.

For 492 days, the Bridgeport, Conn., diocese was without a bishop. The void came in May 2012 when Bishop William Lori moved 250 miles south as archbishop of Baltimore. The long interregnum created somewhat of a chasm between past and future for the area's 400,000-plus Catholics.

On July 31, Pope Francis named Frank Caggiano, an auxiliary bishop from nearby Brooklyn, N.Y., as the fifth bishop of Bridgeport. Installed Sept. 19 -- his deceased mother's birthday -- before 1,200-plus people, Caggiano spoke of the transformative power of bridges, both physical and spiritual, to bring together communities and fortify faiths.

"Bridges unite, they open opportunity, they can even transform human life," he said in the homily.

So it was that the bishop born and bred in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge became the leader of a diocese named after such spans. In eight months, Caggiano, 55, has himself gone to work buttressing existing networks, repairing those long abandoned and constructing new connections.

"There's always the great challenge of allowing people to see that which unites us is greater than that which divides us," Caggiano told *NCR* in an April 8 interview.

Bridgeport is a relatively young diocese that presents unique dichotomies. Its borders follow those of Fairfield County, among the wealthiest areas in the country, while its center, Bridgeport, is among the nation's poorest cities. Its sizeable immigrant population adds to the diversity Caggiano calls "the fabric of life."

In recent years, the diocese has seen its share of scandals. Allegations of clergy sexually abusing minors have been limited, but two priests in the past seven years have gone to jail for embezzling parish funds. In January 2013, Msgr. Kevin Wallin, aka "Msgr. Meth," was indicted for his role in a drug distribution ring, for which he laundered money through an adult store.

Only one of Caggiano's four predecessors remained in the diocese the duration of his ministry, leading some to view it more as a steppingstone rather than a destination. For his part, Caggiano has been rubber to any accusations of clericalism or careerism -- both terms, fairly or unfairly, stuck to Lori and Edward Egan, who became a cardinal in New York.

Bridges to transparency

Caggiano is keenly aware of the impact scandals have on the faithful in any diocese. More than that, he recognizes what it calls of him.

"I think we need to rebuild the trust in the church, among people in the church, with the leadership of the church, of which myself I am a member," he told *NCR*.

Rebuilding trust, the bishop said, requires transparency, simplicity, authenticity "and to have my actions match my words."

So far, so good.

In December, Caggiano released reports on diocesan finances for the fiscal years 2009-2012. The numbers presented a bleak picture, but one he felt compelled to make public:

- An operating deficit of $1.8 million;
- A total deficit of nearly $50 million, largely due to pension funds, frozen for lay employees since 2010;
- A $15 million loan from the Knights of Columbus.

"If I'm going to ask you for financial support, then you need to know what you're giving to and what the state of life is here," he said.

The diocese said they've had great response so far to the annual bishop's appeal, and hope to raise $11 million through it.

In February, Caggiano added members to the diocesan review board and asked they meet quarterly. He also formed a Ministerial Misconduct Advisory Board to review cases not involving minors, as well as problems in ministry. In May, he asked it to review the case of Fr. John Stronkowski, whom Caggiano removed from pastoral duties at St. Margaret Mary Alacoque Parish in Shelton, for "persistent absenteeism" from the parish and "growing difficulties" the priest had with parish staff and lay leaders.

Beginning in June, newly named pastors will serve six-year renewable terms at parishes, something he and others see as a benefit to the priests, the parish and the incoming pastor. Pastors at age 75 will be asked to submit resignations.

And if he has his way, Caggiano will announce that month the return of his current 8,900-square-foot home in Trumbull to its original purpose as the college seminary, where he will maintain a small apartment. As for the current seminary, which needs $3.5 million in repairs, he is exploring fundraising efforts or giving it to the nearby high school. An agreement for the seminarians to study at Fairfield University is also in the works.

Perhaps the most significant announcement came in February, when he called a diocesan synod, Bridgeport's first in 32 years. Carrying the theme "Building Bridges to the Future Together," the yearlong synod officially opens in September; the preparatory stage has begun. The process brings to light challenges facing the diocese. Caggiano has acknowledged that at some point, the diocese will have to undergo strategic planning, a process he envisions for all parishes, not just those struggling.

Through his actions and interactions to date, Caggiano told *NCR*, he hopes he has projected "a real genuine sense that what you see is what you get."

Again, so far, so good.

"He's a breath of fresh air," said Paul Lakeland, the Aloysius P. Kelley, S.J. Chair in Catholic studies at Fairfield University.

Other Bridgeport Catholics interviewed added "inviting," "humorous," "sincere," "good listener," "relatively

fearless," "Vatican II" and "entirely un-image-conscious" to his description.

"It's boringly good," Lakeland said.

The common explanation is that Caggiano carries himself in a way that's more approachable than his predecessors, more ordinary than *ordinary*.

"If you see him out on the streets, and you run into him, he'll talk to you like there's nothing else that matters at that moment," said Florencia Silva, head of the diocese's pastoral services office. She described him as *cercano*, a Spanish word meaning "close to the people."

The closeness is evident in the ongoing marathon of meetings and listening sessions in and outside his office that have filled his schedule since his arrival. He's met with donors, prison reform advocates, the Newtown community and even the local Voice of the Faithful chapter. Additionally, he set aside time specifically to meet with his priests, giving them his personal contact information with a straightforward request: Call me anytime. So far, more than 100 of the diocese's 240 priests have taken up the offer.

The outreach has brought a renewed energy to the presbyterate in a diocese where a few years ago, morale was low and enthusiasm even lower, said Fr. Michael Boccaccio of St. Philip Church in Norwalk. Now, Boccaccio sees his brother priests more engaged, particularly at meetings where even new faces have begun to appear.

"There's a welcome to openness and to a dialogue, and I'm seeing priests become more enthusiastic about their involvement and their criticism or questioning of the bishop," Boccaccio said.

From the priest meetings, Caggiano has "learned their struggles and the struggles of the parishes." Some, like Boccaccio, have expressed that administrative duties and financial struggles have created a vacuum in their pastoral ministry.

"Please, please, please let us be priests," Boccaccio said.

Caggiano has heard that plea, calling it one of the greatest challenges priests have articulated, particularly in the desire and struggle to reach out to distant Catholics. He has also learned of priest isolationism, and wonders aloud if communal rectories might be a solution. Such a step, though, would have to come through the synod process.

So far, criticisms of Caggiano haven't been few and far between -- they're nearly nonexistent, with concerns largely limited to doing too much, too fast, too soon for the diocese, as well as for his own good. In March, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests called for him to commission an independent investigation related to two priests accused of abusing in the late 1960s and '70s, and to publish names of abusers on their website. The diocese is working to publish the list, and Caggiano has communicated informally with several SNAP members.

Bridges to Rome

As noticeable as what Caggiano has done is who he is.

In describing their bishop, people cannot help but draw similarities between him and Pope Francis. First, there are the names. Both have called synods and both were born in the Americas to Italian immigrants. Beyond the superficial, people have witnessed parallels in style.

"He represents in some ways the new kind of bishop that Pope Francis is looking for," Jesuit Fr. Jeffrey von Arx, president at Fairfield University, told *NCR*, listing simple living, a commitment to evangelization and a

faithful message of compassion, forgiveness and engagement.

The confluence of Caggiano and Francis, von Arx said, came together at the right time.

"People are looking for a much simpler delivery of the Christian message, a much more kind of faith-based Christo-centric understanding of Christianity," he said.

The connections make Bridgeport appear closer to Rome, where people can hear what Francis says at the Vatican and then see it lived out in their own neighborhoods.

Like Francis, Caggiano stands firmly in line with church teaching on marriage, ordination and other familiar reform issues, and, when asked, will share his thoughts. But also like Francis, the emphasis is placed elsewhere. He appears more interested in the pastoral development of his diocese than in making statements on hot-button issues. That style diverges from Lori, who became a national point person for the bishops in the religious liberty debate.

But those who have known Caggiano from Brooklyn and before say the Francis parallels are not the result of mirroring; it's just who Frank has always been.

Born on Easter Sunday, Caggiano grew up on Van Sicklen Street in Brooklyn. It was there around the kitchen table he developed much of his personality, style and ministry -- aspects he attributes to his parents. From his father, he learned that familial bonds hold strong, even amid disagreements; from his mother, he learned to listen. His preference for dialogue, he said, keeps him informed and engages others as partners.

"I need to be the guardian of the life of the church. ... But that doesn't mean I have all the answers," he said.

A former Yale student, Caggiano worked as a sales rep for McGraw Hill Publishing Company in the early 1980s. He had a good salary, a company car and expense account. What he didn't have was happiness, and he entered Immaculate Conception Seminary in Huntington, N.Y. He was ordained a priest in 1987.

But it was a moment during his junior year at Regis High School in New York City that he believes set the path of his life. Surrounded by classmates from affluent roots, he felt embarrassed by his lower-middle-class immigrant family. An epiphany opened his eyes to what his parents provided him -- love and a good life.

"The simplicity of life, at that point, I kind of embraced it and I will never let go of it," Caggiano said.

On Sundays, the bishop schedules time for himself, and crosses Long Island Sound to return to Brooklyn and his boyhood home where his sister still lives. There he relaxes and rejuvenates until he returns to work on Monday.

Bridges to 'dissidents'

The room filled with laughter, a lighthearted moment on an otherwise night of solemn discourse. Inside the First Congregational Church on the Green in Norwalk, Boccaccio and Fr. David Blanchfield shared a priest's perspective of the clergy sex abuse scandal with members of the Bridgeport chapter of Voice of the Faithful at its April meeting. About 50 Catholics, most with graying hair, listened, asked questions and expressed opinions.

These were the faces of "dissidents."

The night would have never occurred if not for a meeting in the same church a month before. It was then that members of Voice of the Faithful Bridgeport met with their bishop for the first time in the group's 12-year existence.

"It was quite amazing," said Jamie Dance, the chapter's chair. "So friendly. So engaging. So gracious."

The Bridgeport chapter formed in 2002 after the national affiliate formed in Boston in the wake of *The Boston Globe* sex abuse reports. Shortly after, Lori denounced the group and forbade them from meeting on church property. According to the chapter's history, Lori "did not approve of VOTF in any way" and left unanswered multiple requests to meet.

The Brooklyn Voice of the Faithful affiliate had a far different relationship with its diocese. Caggiano and other chancery staff would meet with them regularly, even share an occasional meal. Because of that history, Caggiano said, "it never dawned on me even to ask" about the relationship between Lori and Voice of the Faithful. When the Bridgeport chapter sent him a welcome letter, he replied and said he looked forward to meeting with them after his installation.

"And sure enough, he reached out to us after that, made the appointment," Dance said.

An hourlong meeting with Dance and chapter founder Joe O'Callaghan laid the groundwork for Caggiano to attend the March 13 meeting of Voice of the Faithful -- a moment the 160 people in attendance and even others across the country saw as historic, but the bishop viewed as nothing out of the ordinary. Questions addressed the role of women in the church, women's ordination, birth control, and the formation of seminarians. Oddly enough, no one asked about the abuse crisis, a sign Dance attributed to the confidence Caggiano inspired.

"Theologically, we will not agree necessarily on some issues," Caggiano told *NCR*, speaking of positions espoused by some in Voice of the Faithful. "But I don't have to agree with you in order to respect you and to talk with you. And that's ultimately what animates that dialogue."

The meeting evoked little negative feedback, outside of a few concerned letters and a critical review of the outreach in the conservative *Crisis* online magazine. The vast majority of people the bishop has spoken to welcomed the dialogue, he said. Boccaccio called Caggiano's reaching out "remarkably wonderful. I am so glad he did that, having opened that door."

But some Voice of the Faithful members remain frustrated that the doors to their churches remain closed to their meetings.

"It is an item on the agenda that we are going to continue to talk about," Caggiano told *NCR*, explaining that he continues to learn more about the theology of the group and its members.

Some have speculated that too quick a move could be viewed as a rebuke of Lori. Dance wonders if negative views of the group continue to linger among the clergy, and she sees the benefits of meeting off church property. In the meantime, she has focused on the "whole new world" that Caggiano has brought to their mission.

"His openness to us means more to us than having a room in a church basement," she said.

Bridges to the future

Caggiano had just finished addressing 23,000 teens inside Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis, typically the

home of the Indianapolis Colts but on this late November weekend the site of the 2013 National Catholic Youth Conference. The Bridgeport bishop -- and episcopal adviser to the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry -- "blew the house away," according to chaperone Kali DiMarco, a youth minister at St. Philip Parish in Norwalk.

After the speech, several teens asked to go see their bishop; she obliged, then watched as they maneuvered through the large crowd toward the main stage, where they threw themselves at Caggiano.

"And I thought that that was a very powerful message," DiMarco said. "One, that they wanted to, and two, the way he received them, and that they felt he was that approachable."

The connection between Caggiano and Bridgeport youth has been instantaneous and magnetic. The bishop speaks of "baptizing the digital world," recognizing that the church must engage it as part of its evangelization, since kids today communicate and socialize differently than previous generations. With that perspective, he has made youth ministry a top goal for the diocese and, more than that, has embodied it. He attends youth events, has celebrated confirmations at all 82 parishes, and seeks to connect with youth on their level.

"You don't feel like he's a bishop," Marisa Mantero, a senior at St. Joseph High School, said. "I tell my mom all the time, 'Can we have him over for dinner?' I want to have him over for dinner like a parish priest. He's just not like a bishop."

DiMarco gets emotional recalling an exchange in Indianapolis between Caggiano and a 14-year-old boy from Iowa. A tradition at the youth conference has attendees donning and trading outrageous hats -- cows and flying pigs, cheeseheads and ice cream cones. After Caggiano finished his speech, the boy asked if he would swap lids; the bishop obliged and exchanged his zucchetto for the boy's giant chili pepper. Later at the conference, DiMarco and a friend ran into the boy and asked what he would trade for the bishop's hat. "Nothing," he replied. "It was the best part of my whole weekend."

In February came the pinnacle event, one Caggiano called "an absolute high point of my time so far here" -- a town hall forum with 350 teens at St. Aloysius Parish in New Canaan. Before the event, pastoral services director Silva asked the bishop what his plan was and what she should prepare. He said he didn't want a theme, or a prepared talk, but would briefly introduce himself and then simply listen.

"I've been through a lot of different dioceses and I have never seen a bishop do that before," said Silva, who also oversees youth ministry.

Not only did he want to introduce himself, he wanted to have a conversation. He wanted to listen. So he asked two questions: What do you like about your church? What don't you like? Sally McHugh, another St. Joseph senior, called the tone more conversation than a lecture, and that the bishop's own openness and sincerity helped quickly develop an environment for honesty.

Some teens said they liked the closeness of their communities, while others asked about same-sex marriage, the definition of love, priest shortages, even the state of Christianity in the Middle East. At one point, Caggiano recalled, a boy told him, "Bishop, I don't like my church because when our boiler broke, we don't have the money to fix it. And there are parishes in this diocese that spend over a million dollars decorating their church."

The answer impressed the bishop: "Talk about an insightful observation that needs to be repeated before the whole synod."

As part of the diocesan synod he's called, Caggiano has included 25 youth delegates, hoping they bring that kind of honesty to the process.

According to Jesuit Fr. Paul Fitzgerald, an ecclesiologist and senior vice president at Fairfield University, diocesan synods are prayerful conversations in the local church, guided by the Holy Spirit, to read the signs of the times and address issues confronting the church.

Diocesan synods, Fitzgerald said, examine "things we're doing now that we don't need to do anymore" or "new things that we want to start doing. Maybe there are old things we want to do in new ways in order to be church."

Often, synods can address larger social issues, such as families, equality, environmentalism and even income inequality -- a topic that could come up in the socioeconomically diverse diocese.

Caggiano said he hopes a "pastoral road map" will emerge from the synod process.

More than 400 delegates will attend the synod's five general sessions; another 400 youth co-delegates will have four separate sessions to keep them involved. The first of five preparatory listening sessions came May 5. Listening sessions are planned for youth and Hispanics as well. Those sessions will wrap up by the end of June and give a glimpse of the priorities the diocese wants to address.

"When you hold a diocesan synod, it's very hard to control what people will do and say," Lakeland said, which in part has made synods somewhat of a rarity since the 1983 revision of canon law altered their necessity from every seven years to the bishop's discretion.

That Caggiano has called a synod, Lakeland said, shows a commitment to a vision of the church found in the Second Vatican Council, one that "recognizes that the majority of people in the church are laypeople and that they have a voice, a legitimate voice, in how it conducts itself."

"I think he recognizes, as Vatican II does, that those who have positions of authority in the church or leadership in the church have them as servants and not as princes," Lakeland said.

Caggiano is well aware decisions will ultimately rest with him, but the bridge builder prefers to have many working hands, of all ages, shades and textures, actively involved in creating a structure that serves the people, not the other way around.

"I sense a real excitement that they want to get involved in the life of the church, which is great," he said. "That's a gift [for which] any bishop would get on his knees and be thankful to the Lord."

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