

WITHOUT A DOUBT

Charlie Bakst: Repairing the world

I have to admit that in preparing to interview M. Charles Bakst, veteran political columnist for the Providence Journal, I felt a little like Dorothy approaching the Wizard of Oz, such is the reputation of the man.

M. Charles Bakst was born in Fall River, Mass. in 1944. He graduated from Phillips Academy in Andover in 1962 and subsequently studied at Brown University and the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. He's been working at the Providence Journal full-time since 1968. He and his wife Elizabeth have two daughters and three granddaughters.

But that's just the beginning. Charlie Bakst is a Rhode Island institution, almost a legend, right up there with Del's Lemonade and Dunkin' Donuts. He usually writes about politics but sometimes wanders into religion and moral issues. His opinions are predictably liberal and secular. His name comes up often in conversations, at least in my circles. People swear by him and people swear at him.

Charlie has interviewed me on a number of occasions, on a number of issues. His reporting has been fair and accurate. One day it occurred to me that it would be interesting to turn the tables, to interview him. And so it came to pass that I found myself at The Providence Journal headquarters.

Interestingly, before Charlie could agree to the interview he needed the permission of two higher-ups in the Journal structure. I asked him if he found that to be irritating or embarrassing. He said that the permission policy is taken very seriously at the



Bishop Thomas J. Tobin

Journal and that he found it "inconvenient." I pointed out that he could come to the Diocese and interview anyone at any time without the same restrictions.

We then moved to more substantive issues and I asked about the personal influences in his life, the forces that formed his world view.

Charlie is Jewish, attending Temple Beth-El in Fall River as a youth and now Temple Habonim in Barrington. In a speech some time ago, he observed that "being Jewish can give you a different perspective on things, can shape your work."

He considers his Jewish faith a "substantial influence" in his life, but it's a "cultural" more than "dogmatic" influence. He expresses his faith by personal prayer, by attending the temple, at least occasionally, by supporting Jewish charities and other charities, and in his writing. Growing up in the temple, he was taught "to help people, to stand up for people."

He mentioned, with obvious pride, that on his father's grave-

stone are the words, "A believer in justice," and on his mother's, "A believer in charity."

"These kinds of things propel me," Charlie observed.

I asked him what words he would like on his tombstone someday.

"That's a very good question," he said. "I'd have to think about that."

I referred to an article he wrote a few months ago about the Nobel Prize winner and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel. In the article, Charlie quotes Wiesel using the phrase "speaking truth to power."

I asked Charlie if he thought the phrase would be an apt description of the role of religion in society. He responded that "anybody who sees a problem has a responsibility to speak up about it. If you see that problem through religious eyes, then it's a religious concept."

I pressed the issue, the need to stand up for your beliefs. "Would that apply to someone like Rudy Giuliani, who says that abortion's wrong but still allows people to choose?"

He responded with, "I think he needs to stand up for his beliefs. He seems to have a bifurcated belief."

(Bifurcated? I had to look it up too!)

The headline of the Elie Wiesel column spoke about his "moral clarity." I asked Charlie if he found that quality in political leaders today.

"No" he said, directly and quickly. To a large extent they're motivated by "polls and image makers . . . They soon get wrapped up in making compromises with their better selves."

From there we plunged into specific moral issues. He admits that abortion "gives him pause" since it involves a life. Nevertheless, he finds that some circumstances might render abortion an acceptable option.

He has "no problem whatsoever" with same sex marriage, embryonic stem cell research and assisted suicide.

"So, you envision a society, then, in which we kill unborn children, dispose of old, sick people, and live a licentious life in between?" I asked.

"You and I look at the same situation and see it differently," he said.

I asked Charlie if there's anything in particular that he admires about the Catholic Church. He says that he admires the work of the Church in advocating for the poor, the homeless, the immigrants. He admires the stability the Church and that it is "a comfort to a lot of people, a good force in their lives."

I also asked if there's anything about the Church that "turns him off."

He said he wouldn't use that expression but that what he finds "mystifying" is that the Church is so "unbending," even in small things that it discourages people from joining or staying with the Church.

Does he have any objection to the Church trying to influence public policy?

"If I were a Catholic person who's also a public official, I might be a little resentful at some of the views you've expressed."

I responded that the Church, like every organization, needs to have some rules for the behavior of its members.

"You're certainly free to do that," he said.

Along the same line, I wondered what Charlie would do if his company, the Journal, asked him to do something contrary to his faith: "Is your allegiance to your company or your faith?"

"That's a really tough question . . . that may be the toughest question I've ever been asked, I would assume . . . that it would be to my faith."

About an hour into the interview we arrived at a crucial and delicate topic, another area in which Charlie and I have diverse viewpoints: sports. He's a passionate New England sports fan, supporting the Red Sox, Patriots, Bruins and Celtics, in that order. I asked him for an early prediction about the Patriots-Steelers game scheduled for December 9. "You can't handle the truth," he warned me, and predicted a Pats' victory, 30-14.

(My prediction: 23-20, Steelers.)

As we concluded, Charlie encouraged me to remind readers that the work of columnists is not the same as objective reporters, that columnists always have a point of view, and that their goal is to "make people think," to get them involved. Fair enough.

Early in the interview, Charlie had referred to a Jewish expression that speaks of "repairing the world," of making the world a better place, a more humane place in which to live. It's a phrase that aptly summarizes Charlie Bakst's vision as a citizen and journalist. Although his perspective on lots of issues is far different from mine, I sincerely admire the passion of his work and the integrity of his life.

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TAKING HIS TURN: Providence Journal columnist M. Charles Bakst, right, ponders a question posed by Bishop Thomas J. Tobin at the downtown headquarters of The Providence Journal.