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By Vicki Viotti vviotti@staradvertiser.com

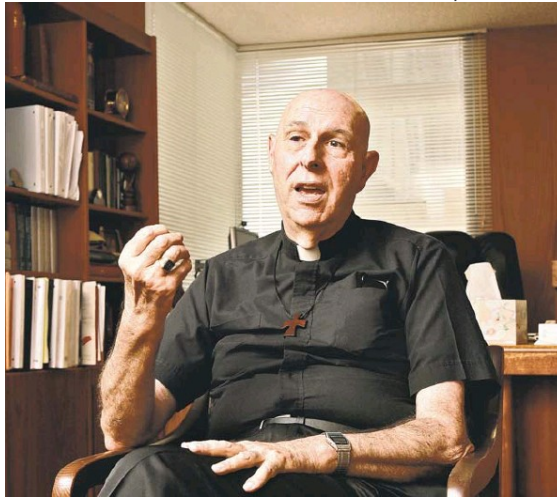
Bishop Larry Silva

Hawaii's first local-born bishop is not deterred by scandal or politics as he leads the church

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Bishop Larry Silva Head of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Honolulu

Bishop Larry Silva, the first Hawaii-born man to hold that title, has had eight years to settle into his job as head of the Catholic Diocese of Honolulu, and he does look settled.



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His mission involves everything from overseeing the mundane financial concerns of the parishes to the more extraordinary events such as the elevation of two Hawaii religious figures to sainthood. Most recently, he accompanied a pilgrimage for healing to Lourdes, France.

Without a doubt, though, it's been a challenging time. The church has weighed in on local concerns — its opposition to the emergency contraception bill was a recent example. And, in the midst of grappling with poverty and homelessness, there has been the buffeting of the sexual abuse scandals. Allegations stemming from past cases, nationally and locally, continue to surface.

Silva underscored that the U.S. church is working to ensure this doesn't occur going forward, with required training for every priest, deacon and volunteer who works with children.

"I would also say that even at the darkest moments, we still have much to do that has nothing to do with sexual abuse," he said. "The moral mission we have has been undermined, I think, in the eyes of the public. But it is still our mission. We must accept it and be courageous in fulfilling that mission."

Silva, 63, descends from a Hawaii line that started with his Portuguese greatgrandparents, who emigrated from the Azores. His parents, however, took him to California at age 1, where he spent most of his life, except for frequent visits to isle kin as an adult.

The religious calling came to Silva, who was a parish priest in Oakland for 30 years, at age 7.

"Certainly, I thought of other things," he added. "I thought of teaching, and maybe being an airline pilot." Really? "It was a passing thought, yeah. I like to travel, but they probably wouldn't want me behind the wheel of an airplane," he said with a smile. "Or whatever they call it."

QUESTION: What was your reaction to the succession of Pope Francis?

ANSWER: Well, I was surprised about who it was because I had never really heard of him before, to tell you the truth. And I was surprised because of his age. I thought after Benedict's retirement, that they would choose somebody younger. But he seems to have been the right person, so he's very refreshing. ... I had great respect for Pope Benedict; I think he was a great teacher. But this pope has a different perspective.

Q: Do you have the sense that he might shake things up a bit?

A: Well, I think he'll shake things up, hopefully getting us back on track in terms of focusing on Jesus and focusing on the poor and what's essential, not focusing on the internal matters of the church but going out to others, taking the good news out.

Q: When you say the internal matters, are you talking about the various scandals?

A: Well, I mean there's that. I think he's going to lead the charge in dealing with that. That's something we have been dealing with, and will continue to deal with. So that's not off the table, certainly. ...

Now, he's got a lot of internal things to do — fixing the bank and fixing his own Cabinet there in Rome, ... hopefully to make them more serviceable, more responsive to the needs of the church. ...

Our own diocese, we're always talking about there are lots of internal things that need to be taken care of, the buildings; ... we need to take care of our parish finances.

So, we can get so busy with those things that we forget that there are homeless people, there are poor people, there are people who never heard the Gospel of Jesus and are longing for that and who would benefit very much from that. So I think we always have that need to remind ourselves of our real mission.

Q: About the homeless: Where do you see the church's role in finding a solution?

A: Oh, absolutely we have a role. I think that's part of our mission. ...

Here in the Diocese of Honolulu, we have several initiatives we are working on. We have an Office of Affordable Housing, which is really meant to take this very complex issue of housing people in a dignified way and breaking it down into smaller, digestible parts that people can get their hands on. ...

So for example, in Pahoehoe, on the Big Island, we had some land that belonged to the diocese, next to the parish there, Sacred Hearts Parish. The Office of Social Ministries had

access to some buildings that were abandoned at Kawaihae, on the other side of the island. They negotiated to get those buildings moved over to Pahoehoe. The parish has taken up the project of rehabilitating those buildings, getting them up to snuff so that people can move into those buildings. ...

But then, sometimes services are needed. People need to learn how to budget their money, people need to clear up their debts, and so on. And the parishioners have volunteered to help with that. So, everything from hammering and nailing, to painting, to financial advising, to cooking for those who are working — everyone has their part that they can do. ...

Other parishes, through this Office of Affordable Housing, have identified some government-owned units, city-owned or state-owned units, that were not occupied because they are not in good condition, they weren't habitable. But it didn't really take much to get them in good condition. So we had volunteers go in and rehab these buildings. Q: Where was this? A: This was all over this island, and some on the Big Island. And I think they've gotten about 150 units back in circulation so they're no longer empty. ... Catholic Charities Hawaii is working on a senior housing development in Mililani Mauka.

Yesterday, I had a meeting with Pam Witty-Oakland, who's working for the mayor of Honolulu and with Jerry Rauckhorst, who's CEO of Catholic Charities. And we talked about that: What could we do to help people get into housing? There are those who need very intense services. But then we talked about others who maybe need some guidance, some service, but maybe it doesn't need to be so intense, so professional, and maybe we can train volunteers to do those services, such as financial planning or budgeting, that sort of thing. ...

Q: On the emergency contraception law, which the church opposed, do you think that because the St. Francis sisters left the management of the two hospitals, the church lost some influence on this issue?

A: That may be; that's a possibility. But more than that, I think, there is a question of religious liberty that is on the table.

We believe that life begins at conception, that that life is precious and valuable, and that life has a right to continue, to live.

Now, the emergency contraceptive issue is complicated, because certainly we have great compassion and sympathy for a woman who is raped; that is not something we just take lightly. And we can understand that it's a burden for her to bear that child.

But the key is this: Whether the child is conceived through rape or through love, it's a child, and it has a right to life, and that is our point. The emergency contraceptives may stop ovulation — and if they do that, that's fine. But if they actually put to death a child that's already conceived, then we have a problem. ...

Some of the testimony was that some Catholic hospitals give the emergency contraceptive. Yes, that's true. But usually they give a pregnancy test first. If the ovulation has occurred, they will not, but if ovulation has not occurred, yes.

But that was a distinction that was lost to the legislators. And, let's face it, many of them don't agree with what we believe is good science, that a human life begins at conception.

Q: Is there a possibility the church could challenge this legally?

A: Well, it could, especially if somebody is forced to do something against their conscience. We have Catholic nurses and doctors who are opposed to abortion. ... We would want their conscience and rights to be respected.

This is the whole issue with the (Department of) Health and Human Services, as well.

Q: You mean the Obamacare mandate for contraception coverage?

A: Right. The government is telling us what we must believe.

Q: Doesn't the law provide exceptions for religious institutions?

A: Right. But they're exceptions that are defined by the government, rather than the church defining what makes us a church, what is essential to us. ...

Q: What's the church concern about the state's push for publicly funded preschool? Is it that church-run schools would be restricted from proselytizing if it receives that tuition money?

A: Absolutely, that is our major concern. We do have preschools, we certainly are one of the major providers of preschool education in the state. So we believe in early learning.

That being said, we really believe in the parents doing that early education. But given our economic situation, and the fact that in most cases parents have to work, we want to provide a place where children can learn and be inculcated with the faith.

It could have been worked out that funds could be given to the private schools and religious schools for pre-K so that children could get what they need, and the government could say, "You run the school the way you choose to run the school, according to your own statutes and charters." And, of course, the parents then have a choice as to whether they want to send their child to that school or not. ...

But the attorney general has ruled that, no, if the school is receiving public funds, they can only use it for secular purposes. Well, that concept of separating secular subjects and religious subjects doesn't fly with us. Everything is religious ... everything somehow is part of God's plan.