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Same-sex marriage and Communion

Pat Perriello | Oct. 9, 2012 NCR Today

Bishop John J. Myers of Newark, N.J., has written a pastoral letter [1] telling Catholics not to go to Communion if they approve of same-sex marriage.

He describes marriage as coming from God but acknowledges that it is recognized by the state as well. He also said the timing of his letter had nothing to do with the upcoming elections. He accuses other bishops of not being clear on homosexuality. He mentions traditional Catholic teaching that homosexuality is not sinful, but homosexual acts are. He encourages celibacy for those who are homosexual, noting that priests are held to celibacy so homosexuals should be able to be celibate also. Apparently he hasn't noticed that a number of priests have not done too well with the celibacy thing. Interestingly, he has also been accused of allowing at least four priests in the diocese to be transferred after sex abuse allegations.

Why do some bishops operate this way? Are they trying to show us who is in charge? They do have authority, but is this the best way to exercise that authority? Is this the use of authority Jesus expects from his leaders?

The authority of the bishops is no different than that of civil authorities. If civil authorities punish someone for disagreeing with them or espousing a different position, we would consider it an abuse of power. When a bishop acts autocratically and denies the sacraments to his flock because they disagree with him, how is this different? Using the sacraments that are meant to nourish Christ's people as leverage or as a power move does not seem congruent with the way of Jesus.

The New Testament does show that there was an emerging episcopacy by the end of the first century. The Pastoral Epistles of Timothy and Titus especially indicate the presence of bishops in individual churches. The Gospel of John, however, shows us something of how that authority is to be exercised. In order to be a legitimate leader in the church, one must first love Jesus. John 21 has Jesus question Peter three times as to his love for Jesus. He then tells Peter to feed his lambs. Notice he does not give his flock over to Peter. They are still his lambs. We belong to Jesus, not to the bishop. So far, few bishops are following the lead of Bishop Myers. Maybe it's because they know this is not the best way to lead. Perhaps they understand this is not reflective of the good shepherd of the Gospels.

Let me add an additional word on the issue of same-sex marriage itself. Bishop Myers' point of view as well as the church's current opposition to same-sex marriage in those states where it is on the ballot this fall reflects a somewhat narrow view of society. Their goal is to protect the institution of marriage -- but from what? They have taken a purely civil issue and attempted to turn it into a religious issue. The church is being given complete authority to marry whomever they choose and to not marry couples that they wish not to. They are not being asked to recognize any marriage against their will. They have complete control over the marriage of couples that come before them.

As Bishop Myers acknowledges, the state also has a role to play in marriage. It has authority to grant economic and other rights to couples and appropriately make judgments regarding the civil institution of marriage. The churches are not impacted by these civil determinations. In states where same-sex marriage has been enacted,

nothing has changed. How has traditional marriage been damaged? It seems these bishops have a vision of what society should look like and seek to implement and maintain this vision. However, that goes beyond their religious function because society, especially in our country, has a right to operate outside the purview of the church.

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