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Synod notebook: A gentler style on church/state rows

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Although the Synod of Bishops on New Evangelization is poised to call for the creation of a new international body of prelates to support the cause of religious freedom, it also got a reminder that bishops in various countries sometimes have different ideas about how church/state battles ought to be waged.

At a time when the bishops of the United States are fighting tooth and nail against perceived incursions on the Catholic identity of institutions, Bishop Kieran Conry of Arundel and Brighton in the United Kingdom sketched a kinder, gentler approach, under the rubric of ?you only fight battles you can win.?

Conry made his remarks in a session with English-speaking reporters at the Vatican Press Office.

The backdrop is the 2006 ?Equality Act? in the United Kingdom, which among other things made it illegal for adoption agencies, including those run by the Catholic church, to refuse to serve same-sex couples. Rather than protesting the law, Conry said that the agency sponsored by his and other dioceses said it would comply and thus took the word ?Catholic? out of its name.

That decision, he said, was based on two convictions:

- The interests of children should be the top priority
- The likelihood of gay couples actually using the agency was remote

Conry said that the agency, called the ?Cabrini Children?s Society,? is still supported financially by the church, and the church still appoints its governors and trustees. The agency is still in operation, he said, placing roughly thirty children annually in new homes.

?We wanted to make sure the interests of the children in that case were served first,? he said. ?If, as happened in some dioceses, the local authority virtually forced the closure of adoption agencies, then children suffered. We said we?ll take a step back and ensure that the welfare of children is our priority, and that?s been upheld.?

?There are thirty children who are taken out of institutions and put into families,? Conry said.

The decision to take the name ?Catholic? away does not, Conry said, signal a retreat.

?It?s not that Catholics aren?t interested in this anymore,? he said, ?but we?re not going to have a public fight that we?re possibly going to lose and come out of it with everyone suffering.?

Further, he said, the instinct that there would not be an avalanche of demand from same-sex couples has proven correct.

?It?s been seven years since that legislation was enacted, and that adoption agency has not had a single request

from a gay couple to adopt or foster a child,? he said.

Conry said that should a gay couple wish to make such a request as a sort of test case, they would have to wait their turn like everyone else and go through the normal screening process to ensure they were the best possible option for a given child.

In that light, he said, it?s ?at least unlikely, if not impossible,? that such a situation would really arise.

Prior to the Equality Act, the Catholic church ran several agencies in England, Wales and Scotland which were responsible for roughly one-tenth of all adoptions in the United Kingdom every year.

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