Opinion

Guest Voices



Activists hold placards during their picket against Uganda's anti-homosexuality bill at the Ugandan High Commission in Pretoria, South Africa on April 4. Uganda's president Yoweri Museveni has signed into law tough new anti-gay legislation supported by many in the country but widely condemned by rights activists and others abroad. (AP/Themba Hadebe)



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The world is watching in disbelief as Uganda, a country known for its vibrant diversity and rich culture, continues to regress on human rights issues, particularly concerning the LGBTQ+ community. The country on May 29 enacted a law, colloquially known as the "Kill the Gays" bill, that imposes severe and harsh penalties for homosexuality, including the death penalty or life imprisonment in some cases.

While the international outcry grows louder, the silence from a significant portion of Uganda's moral and spiritual guardians — the Catholic bishops — is deafening.

This ongoing silence becomes more notable considering the Catholic Church's influential role in Uganda, with nearly 40% of Ugandans identifying as Catholic. Catholic bishops, considered moral leaders by millions, hold a unique position of influence and could potentially shift the narrative around this inhumane legislation.

Same-sex activity was already illegal in Uganda, as it is in more than 30 African countries, but the new law goes even further. It is, by any objective measure, a gross violation of human rights that contravenes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international conventions to which Uganda is a signatory.

> Their silence indirectly contributes to a climate of fear, hate and intolerance that stokes violence and discrimination against LGBTQ+ people.
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On the international stage, Pope Francis has proven to be a breath of fresh air, guiding the Catholic Church to a more open and accepting stance toward LGBTQ+

issues. He recently — and several times — has harshly condemned laws that criminalize homosexuality. "Being homosexual isn't a crime," he said. "We are all children of God, and God loves us as we are and for the strength that each of us fights for our dignity."

Yet, despite the pope's words, Uganda's Catholic bishops remain noticeably silent on this issue. Also silent is the Vatican's Dicastery for Evangelization that oversees the dioceses and bishops in Uganda. Their silence creates a void, one filled by fear, discrimination and dehumanization. As moral and spiritual leaders, their words — or lack thereof — can shape public opinion, either legitimizing these inhumane laws or challenging them.

Ugandan Bishop Sanctus Lino Wanok, depicted homosexuality as "not human" and akin to "death," while Fr. Agabito Arinaitwe, an influential priest in the important parish of the Uganda Martyrs Catholic Shrine, said, with reference to homosexuality: "It's time we turn away from our evil deeds and turn back to the Lord." They are not the only ones who have made such public comments.

This is a plea for the bishops to embody the spirit of the Christian doctrine they teach — one of love, compassion, understanding and, most important, respect for the dignity of all humans. All human beings should not just be tolerated, but celebrated —as my good friend, Kate, says.

The Catholic bishops in Uganda have a responsibility not to condone this legislation passively. Their silence indirectly contributes to a climate of fear, hate and intolerance that stokes violence and discrimination against LGBTQ+ people.

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By speaking out against this law, the bishops can align themselves with Pope Francis' vision of a more inclusive church, one that respects the intrinsic worth and dignity of all people, regardless of their sexual orientation.

It is time for the Ugandan Catholic bishops and the Vatican Dicastery for the Evangelization to break their silence. It's time for them to denounce this legislation as contrary to human dignity and the love that underpins Christianity. Their words could reverberate throughout the nation and the world, promoting a message of love and acceptance over hate and discrimination.

It's time we hear from those trusted to guide the moral compass of their millions of followers. The silence is deafening; the cost can be death and the violation of basic human rights. That is not acceptable. The world, and most importantly, the LGBTQ+ community in Uganda, waits for them to stand up for the fundamental Christian principle to love thy neighbor.

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