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Listening to love

Nicole Sotelo | Feb. 18, 2010

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Last week, Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, issued a statement that claimed that New Ways Ministry, a pastoral organization for lesbian and gay Catholics, could not speak on behalf of the faithful in the United States. The statement not only raises the question, ?Who speaks for Catholics today?? but even more pressing is this question: ?Is anyone listening?? According to some recent studies, Catholics are listening, but not always to the bishops.

The Pew Forum?s 2008 ?U.S. Religious Landscape Survey? shows that what most influences Catholic thinking on political issues is not religious belief, but personal experience. Among the many influences on Catholic thought such as friends and family, the church or the media, only 9 percent of Catholics say religious beliefs influence their thinking the most. Catholics overwhelmingly cite personal experiences (35 percent) as being the most influential on their thinking -- more than any other factor.

And this is not likely to change anytime soon. Researchers at the Catholic University of America have been tracking a similar question for more than two decades and have found that the number of U.S. Catholics who see final moral authority in church leaders has been dropping steadily between 1987 and 2005. Perhaps most surprising is that it is the oldest generation of Catholics, those born in 1940 or before, who are changing their views the fastest of any generation.

On the question of homosexuality, a study in 1987 found that 46 percent of the oldest generation of Catholics felt that final moral authority rested with church leaders. Since then, that number has dropped to only 33 percent. Instead, increasing numbers of seniors believe that final moral authority rests not with bishops, but with individuals.

In fact, the Pew study showed that 77 percent of Catholics in the United States believe that there is more than one true way to interpret the teachings of the church. This opens the way for Catholics to make decisions not solely based on bishops, but on their own experiences of God working in their lives.

This heuristic approach holds not only on the topic of homosexuality, but also holds true on issues such as contraception or divorce and remarriage. It also stands for issues of health care. Catholics for Choice?s 2009 study, ?Catholic Voters? Views on Health Care Reform and Reproductive Health Care Services,? found that 68 percent of Catholic voters rejected the argument being made by some Catholic bishops that the faithful were obligated to oppose any health care reform plan that allows for abortion coverage.

Catholics may hear what a bishop says, but when it comes to getting health care for one?s child, using condoms with one?s spouse or making other decisions on what have become contentious political or moral issues of our time, Catholics choose what is right for their beloved, not for their bishop.

So when it comes to the issue of New Ways Ministry and their work for gay and lesbian Catholics, Cardinal

George should not be concerned about ?Who speaks for Catholics?? but rather, ?To whom are Catholics listening??

The answer seems clear: Catholics are listening to love. And based on New Ways Ministry?s 33-year history of working to build a church that loves all God?s children, I think I may know to whom Catholics are listening.

[Nicole Sotelo is the author of *Women Healing from Abuse: Meditations for Finding Peace*, published by Paulist Press, and coordinates **www.WomenHealing.com** [1]. A graduate of Harvard Divinity School, she currently works at Call To Action.]

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[1] http://www.WomenHealing.com