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Catholics, Orthodox must resolve gay marriage opposition

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

Because of my long interest in ecumenical relations and Christian unity (not uniformity), I've been intrigued over the last few months by what seems to be progress in Catholic-Orthodox dialogue.

Fr. Thomas Ryan offered a detailed look at some of this last month in an *NCR* commentary -- Catholic and Orthodox Unity: Close Enough to Imagine -- which produced lots of reader comments.

A few of those comments mentioned the struggle both the Catholic and Orthodox traditions have had -- and continue to have -- over the issue of how to deal with homosexuality within the Christian household.

Both traditions have insisted that homosexuality is out of bounds. Or, as this part of the Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it: "deep-seated homosexual tendencies" are "objectively disordered."

And as this branch of Orthodoxy puts it: "In scripture homosexual behavior is not blessed by God and specifically prohibited."

Naturally, many Catholics reject that position, just as some Orthodox Christians do. And I, too, reject it, though my Presbyterian denomination currently forbids ordination of openly gay people as clergy -- a prohibition that may change if enough regional governing bodies, or presbyteries, approve a constitutional amendment now being voted on. I favor ordaining otherwise qualified gays and lesbians.

For an explanation of my position, see this page on my blog.

I raise all of this to suggest that as the Catholic and Orthodox branches of Christianity seek unity, they

will have more to overcome than issues of papal primacy and the controversy over the *Filioque* phrase in the Nicene Creed.

They will, in fact, eventually need to come to some joint understanding of what it means to be homosexual and how the church should respond to the aspirations of gay Christians to be included fully within the life of the church. Already the current, similar positions of both branches is being challenged.

Indeed, recently in the Orthodox tradition, new voices calling for liberation of gay Christians are being heard.

Within the last few weeks, for example, a book, *Homosexuality in the Orthodox Church* by Justin R. Cannon, has been published.

It gives voice to gay Orthodox Christians who seek full inclusion within the church and it offers a relatively brief but quite complete and compelling analysis of the passages of scripture often cited as reasons for continuing the official prejudicial behavior against gays and lesbians promulgated by the church.

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That official prejudice is rooted in a long misreading of those biblical passages in much the same way that many Christians prior to the American Civil War based their support of slavery on various passages from the Bible. And this exegetical struggle is going on in Catholicism and Protestantism as well as now within Orthodoxy.

Well, let me clarify that. The struggle is going on at official levels and at -- how to put this? -- certain age levels of congregants and clergy. For the truth, in my experience, is that most people in the church under age 40 or so cannot imagine what the issue is. Partly because most of them have known, gone to school with, worked with and been related to gay people, they are far past the possibility of opposing either homosexuality or wanting to prohibit gays and lesbians from participating fully in the church.

So this issue, while not yet settled on the side of liberation by the Catholic or Orthodox churches, is simmering near the surface and will require some kind of resolution if those two branches mean to come together.

And although this may not be the most important issue on the church unity agenda, it will be indicative of the kind of unified church to be created.

As Justin Cannon writes in his new book: "Jesus befriended those who were marginalized because he knew it was only in the security of loving, unconditional relationships that hearts and lives are healed."

If that's not the Jesus a unified Catholic-Orthodox church intends to follow, who will want to belong?

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