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Catholic hierarchs lose marriage battle to Catholic laity

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

It took nearly two days for Archbishop Timothy Dolan to comment on the historic passage of legislation allowing gays and lesbian to marry in the state of New York.

He waited until he had concluded Sunday Mass at St. Patrick's on the Feast of Corpus Christi. As chance, or the Holy Spirit, would have it, this was also Gay Pride Sunday.

Dolan met with reporters in a rear corner of the cathedral. When asked why he didn't mention gay marriage in his homily, Dolan said he thought it would be a distraction to the Sabbath day, which is meant for prayer.

He added, "I sorta needed a good dose of the Lord's grace and mercy because I've been a little down, as you can imagine."

Continuing in his dejected tone, Dolan admitted, "I can say this now. I'm not surprised. I had been led to believe from the beginning...that this was a tough, uphill battle."

Across the East River, Dolan's confrère, Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of the Brooklyn diocese, was less resigned. In a Sunday morning editorial in the *Daily News*, Brooklyn's "chief shepherd," as he referred to himself, offered these fighting words:

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As a protest, I have asked my collaborators not to bestow or accept honors, nor to extend a platform of any kind to any state elected official, in all our parishes and churches for the foreseeable future.

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The passage of the gay marriage bill, DiMarzio says, is "another nail in the coffin of marriage." Writing

lines that unintentionally drip with irony, DiMarzio worries that the new law is detrimental to the welfare of children:

The children of our state deserve the best. We put in place public policies to ensure that children...are safe from harms way....Our children in New York State deserve the best and unfortunately there seem to be very few if any ?Profiles in Courage.?

It's no wonder Dolan and DiMarzio are feeling especially trouble. One look at key players in the road to the same-sex marriage victory reveals a strikingly Catholic roster.

The bill's sponsor, assembly member, Daniel O'Donnell, was raised Catholic. He met his partner of 31 years on his first day of college at The Catholic University of America.

Tom Duane, the New York State Senate's first openly gay and openly HIV-positive member, has been gay marriage's greatest champion for years. Though he no longer practices, he was raised Catholic.

The first Republican senator to break ranks and agree to vote in favor of the bill was Joseph Alesi, who was raised Catholic and graduated from St. John Fisher College in Rochester, N.Y.

And, of course, Governor Andrew Cuomo, whose commitment, political influence, and impeccable organizational skills were the most powerful force behind the bill's approval, was raised in a Catholic home. A pro-choice, cohabitating divorcee, Cuomo receives communion when he attends Mass and reportedly takes his Catholicism seriously.

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One wonders whether Dolan's depression and DiMarzio's mania was less a reaction to New York's eroding moral fabric than it was a realization of the twilight of their once formidable power over New York politics.

The bishops refuse to see that these officials were actually honoring the Catholic social justice tradition in their motivation for passing the marriage bill. They approached the issue as a cause for civil rights. From health care proxies and medical benefits to tax laws, same sex couples will now enjoy thousands of rights previously available only to married heterosexuals.

Listening Dolan at his impromptu press conference after Sunday Mass, one wonders if a little bit of their compassion didn't rub off on him.

After expressing his disappointment with the bill's passage, Dolan stated:

To the gay community, I love you very much. If anything I ever said or did would lead you to believe that I have anything less than love or respect for you, I apologize.

As the archbishop spoke these words, just outside the cathedral doors stood more than a dozen peaceful protestors from the New York chapter of DignityUSA. They have offered this witness every Gay Pride Sunday since 1987. They stand together for thirty minutes each year, waiting for a dialogue that the archbishop chose instead to have with news cameras.

Fifteen blocks south of St. Patrick's, members of the gay and lesbian ministry at the Church of St. Francis Xavier lined up for the fifteenth consecutive year to march in the Gay Pride Parade. Since Dolan came to New York, he has attempted to block the parishioners from marching in the parade under their traditional

banner, which read, "The Church of St. Francis Xavier, A Roman Catholic Parish." For decades Xavier has been recognized city-wide and nationally for its prophetic outreach to LGBT Catholics.

Fearing that Dolan would impose punishment on the parish, the group marched with a blank banner last year. This year, after months of agonized conversation and discernment, they opted to purchase a new banner that read "St. Francis Xavier, Come to the Table." In previous years, under different pastoral leadership, the group also received a blessing from the church's pastor before heading out to the march. No such blessing was offered this year.

In addition to his interactions with members of Dignity and Xavier, those who watched Dolan interviewed on *60 Minutes* three short months ago still have vivid memories of the Archbishop's equating gay marriage with incest, as he quipped, "I love my mom, but I don't have a right to marry her."

While Dolan's contrite tone on that Corpus Christi morning no doubt piqued the interest of some gay and lesbian Catholics throughout the city, Christ's body cannot begin to mend until he faces this community and offers his loving, apologetic words in the flesh.

I have been struck by the effect that the passage of the marriage bill has had on my own sense of dignity. Though I am blessed not to carry any guilt or shame about my sexuality, walking through New York City streets on Pride weekend with my partner, I did experience new, unexpected feelings of legitimacy and integrity. I can finally appreciate how good equality is for the spirit.

I suspect many members of the gay and lesbian community will continue to discover this as well. Though all will seek marriage as their civil right, many will also seek to honor the transcendent, spiritual bonds that their love also creates. Though most will not receive this affirmation from religious authorities, the door toward that recognition has been opened, thanks in no small part to several courageous, lay Catholic leaders.

Our elected officials are leading the state and the nation toward a vision of equality for all citizens. In the same way, married gay and lesbian Catholic couples, by living out the goodness and holiness of their committed relationships, will lead the church toward that future day of justice and inclusion for all members of the body of Christ.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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