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Sacrificing children for Catholic identity

by Brian Cahill



Brian Cahill, former executive director San Francisco Catholic Charities. (Photo taken from the SFSU Web site)

COMMENTARY

For almost 10 years as the executive director of San Francisco Catholic Charities, I was directly involved in efforts to manage the tension between what our church teaches in the area of sexuality, and how we carried out our mission to serve the poor, the vulnerable and the marginalized.

We dealt with many challenges, but the most complex, significant and painful issue was same-sex adoption.

Catholic Charities provides a broad range of services to all in need regardless of their faith. Following the 1906 earthquake, finding adoptive homes for orphans was our first program.

For the last 40 years the focus of the Catholic Charities adoption program had been finding suitable placements for foster care children. In recent years we averaged 25 adoptions per year. Few same-sex couples applied, but when they did, we were pleased to work with them if they met the criteria.

We knew that of the 80,000 children in the California foster care system, half were waiting to be adopted. We also knew that the largest cohort of potential adoptive parents for these children were committed same-sex couples who wanted to create family. In the last five years of the program we had placed 136

children, 5 of them in the homes of gay and lesbian couples.

In early 2003, I received a letter from a parishioner questioning whether we were making same-sex placements. I drafted a response explaining the needs of hard-to-place foster children for qualified loving homes, and said we were guided not only by church teaching, but also by the best interests of the children we served and by state law prohibiting discrimination against prospective adoptive parents because of sexual orientation. I sent the draft letter to Archbishop William Levada, and after some minor edits, he approved the letter.

In June of 2003, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued an updated teaching on gay marriage. For the first time, same-sex adoption was prohibited and same-sex adoptive parents were characterized as "doing violence" to children by adopting them. Archbishop Levada was a member of the Congregation at that time.

In his parish advisory of June 30, 2003, he only referenced the reiteration of church teaching on gay marriage and made no reference to adoption. From the point of my letter delineating our practice to his elevation as the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he never directed me to change our practice regarding same sex adoption.

In late 2005, the Boston Globe reported that Boston Catholic Charities had been placing children with same-sex couples. In light of the Vatican directive, Boston decided to end their adoption program in early March 2006.

The Boston Globe began to look at San Francisco, and the archdiocesan director of communication alerted Archbishop Levada in Rome. He issued a statement which was released to the Boston Globe on March 9, 2006.

He acknowledged that I told him about three cases of hard-to-place children with same-sex couples. He stated "these placements involved prudential judgments about the needs of the children, the teachings of the Catholic church, and the overall policies of Catholic Charities."

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He went on to state that since the 2003 Vatican statement, "it has been and remains my position that Catholic agencies should not place children in homosexual households." It appeared that Roman careerism had trumped pastoral sensitivity and child protection.

Our new Archbishop George Niederauer took a pastoral approach to this issue from the start. We met with the archbishop and his advisors to develop a strategy. We also drafted a joint statement acknowledging church teaching in this area and stating that we would review our adoption program to see how we could best continue to serve the needs of these vulnerable children.

Unfortunately, the archdiocesan communications director subsequently amended the statement to take a more orthodox position, and prematurely released it to the press. Our conflict became public. The real issue here was his desire to tell the world we were stopping these placements and our need to say we were not stopping them until we had an alternative in place.

The archbishop was not happy with either of us, but he was committed to creating an acceptable solution.

We reassured our government partners that we were working on a solution and did not intend to abandon

these children. We created a work group of program staff, board members, health care ethicists and two highly qualified priest theologians. Our director of programs began to work with Family Builders, a local adoption agency with rich experience recruiting same-sex couples as adoptive parents. Family Builders also had developed a statewide adoption match Web site called California Kids' Connection. There was limited funding for the Web site, and as a result, county adoption agencies were not using it. Our employees would transition over to Family Builders and staff the Web site. They would answer questions from prospective adoptive parents about specific children, and would help families find an adoption agency in their area so they could begin the adoption process.

Because they would not do specific matching or placing, our consulting theologians determined that for Catholic Charities there would be no formal cooperation with evil. While I didn't consider anything we were doing as evil, I understood the need to be clear that we were not in conflict with church teaching. I tried to ignore my disgust for this particular church teaching.

The archbishop approved the program and our board approved \$250,000 annually for the staff allocation and related costs. The workers on the Web site responded to more than 400 inquiries per month, resulting in 40 adoptions a year.

When the collaboration was announced, we had a positive response from our local government partners and from the secular press, but the reaction of the conservative Catholic press was scathing in its criticism and condemnation. In spite of the archbishop's support of the program, there was strong conservative pressure to end the program.

As the recession hit, the Catholic Charities budget deficit forced some painful choices. I retired at the end of 2008, the collaboration with Family Builders ended in 2009, and based on a poorly conceived, disrespectful and harshly written Roman policy, San Francisco Catholic Charities joined Boston, New York, Chicago, Washington and other dioceses abandoning a hundred-year tradition and thousands of needy children.

In a speech at the National Catholic Social Workers Conference, Archbishop Charles Chaput pushed the party line on Catholic identity, urging that Catholic social services must be "explicitly Catholic." I believe Catholic Charities manifests its Catholicism far better by using Mathew 25 as a guide rather than a destructive, irresponsible and un-Christ like Vatican promulgation.

[Brian Cahill is former director of Catholic Charities in San Francisco.]

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