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Can Catholics teach Presbyterians how to live with tension?

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

A month ago a new section of the constitution of my denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), became effective. Amendment 10-A allows our church to ordain otherwise-qualified gays and lesbians as clergy and officers.

Why should Catholics care about this? For several reasons, not the least of which is that some of us Presbyterians may be coming to Catholics to ask how you've handled having a priesthood with a substantial gay population when the Catholic church teaches that having a deep-seated tendency toward homosexuality is "objectively disordered."

We hope you have helpful answers because we Presbyterians now face painful divisions within our church after the adoption of this constitutional amendment -- one that I favor and have favored for several decades. (To read my essay on what the Bible says about homosexuality, click here. [<http://bit.ly/q0T102>])

Catholics have lived with such tensions for a long time. Perhaps you have learned some things that can help us -- and I hope it's something other than an ecclesial version of don't-ask/don't-tell. We Presbyterians finally are past that, thank goodness.

Another reason Catholics may care about this Presbyterian story is that it shows once again how the church can be hurt when it fails to be a leader in movements to liberate people. That's a lesson all religions need to learn.

After all, parts of the church once stood in the doorway to keep blacks and other minorities out -- even finding Bible-based ways of justifying slavery. And those churches and their leaders wound up looking

foolish.

Parts of the church have blocked full equality for women. And as each day passes that looks like an increasingly untenable position, though, of course, I recognize the freedom each religion or denomination has to stand by its own theology and traditions.

And many parts of the church have declared homosexuality to be a sin and, thus, excluded gays and lesbians from full acceptance in the body of Christ. This, too, has placed the church on the wrong side of history. Worse, it is more and more evident that the anti-gay position is based on a misreading -- at times a willful misreading -- of the Bible.

The latest book to make this point is *The Bible Now*, by Richard Elliott Friedman and Shawna Dolansky. They take a clear-eyed, scholarly look at the Hebrew Scriptures, seeking to get the reader to grasp the terrible trouble one gets into simplifying any passage in the service of an ideology. They write: "Understanding these passages is difficult. It is complicated. It is more difficult and more complicated than one might think when one first reads the verses."

I'm not sure how the adoption of this new constitutional amendment will play out with us Presbyterians. In a column I wrote for a national independent Presbyterian magazine, I urged those who disagree with this action to stay in the church, just as those of us who disagreed with the previous policy banning ordination of gays stayed when we lost vote after vote.

"Imagine what a wonderful model it would be for others if we Presbyterians held together" after this vote, I wrote. And I meant it.

Indeed, when I want to look for an inspirational model of a church that holds together in the midst of controversy, I generally look first to the Catholic church (notwithstanding that little 16th Century disagreement). Yes, millions of Catholics have left out of frustration over this or that teaching. But the American Catholic church in particular has found ways to absorb disagreements and not simply atomize (like Protestants).

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If you Catholics can please teach us Presbyterians how to pull that off, we'll be eternally grateful as we look toward a future that puts us once again on the side of human liberation, even if some of our members don't want us to go there, preferring instead to draw increasingly meaningless lines in the sand.

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