

What if the 'good guys' apologized?

Brian Cahill | Oct. 24, 2011



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

COMMENTARY

The intense focus on the authoritarianism and harshness of some American bishops runs the risk of distracting from the reality that among the American hierarchy are a number of outstanding bishops who are authentic shepherds, committed to justice and charity, and whose first response to any issue is compassion. We tend to ignore their presence, not just because of their more outspoken colleagues, but because they tend to remain silent.

I know some of these bishops. They are the "good guys." They have counterparts in other regions of our country. What would happen if they stood up collectively and apologized?

Genuine, heartfelt apology is an essential element of forgiveness, a powerful agent of reconciliation and a beautiful manifestation of God's healing grace. Beverly Engel wrote in *Psychology Today*, "Apology is not just a social nicety. It is an important ritual, a way of showing respect and empathy for the wronged person." She goes on, "Apology has the ability to disarm others of their anger and to prevent further misunderstandings. While an apology cannot undo harmful past actions, if done sincerely and effectively, it can undo the negative effects of those actions."

Perhaps there are only 30 or 40 bishops willing to stand up, but what might such an apology accomplish within our church and beyond in "showing respect and empathy for the wronged person," in creating an opportunity to "disarm others of their anger" and in causing reconciliation and healing?

For what should they apologize? They could apologize for the molestation scandal, but we will have to wait for a pope who has some credibility in this area to apologize for the entire tragedy.

They could apologize for the failure to ordain women priests, but that won't mean anything until women can be ordained.

They could apologize for the insensitive and destructive actions or statements of some of their colleagues, but that would probably mean they would be issuing weekly apologies.

I am the father of a gay son, and I may not be objective, but I would suggest to the 30 or 40 bishops who might

be willing to stand up that they could apologize for the disrespect our church has shown to gays and lesbians, sometimes blatant, sometimes nuanced, but always felt, and for the pain intentionally or otherwise inflicted on gays and lesbians by church teaching and how it has been presented.

I know they took a specific oath that locks them into loyalty and obedience. But no oath to the church requires them to ignore the harsh, disrespectful language our church uses. No oath requires them to gloss over the dichotomy between showing compassion and respect for gays and lesbians and at the same time condemning them for acting on who they are. No oath requires them to pretend that the "compassion and respect" component of the teaching does not take a distant second place to the condemnation.

The lack of respect and compassion continues. Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn, N.Y., grouching about the passage of the New York marriage law suggested that children will be "in harm's way," simultaneously denigrating loving gay and lesbian adoptive parents and ignoring the hundreds of thousands of children languishing in the foster care system who are in need of parental love.

Archbishop for the Military Services Timothy Broglio, in opposing the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," stated that Catholic chaplains "can never condone, even silently, homosexual behavior," seemingly unconcerned about being a proponent of continued discrimination in the military, and by his silence, apparently also unconcerned about condoning unmarried heterosexual behavior in the military, another example of the double standard our church uses when it comes to gays and lesbians.

I know what church teaching and its promulgation has done to loved ones close to me. I have experienced the suffering of my son, of the sons and daughters of friends, neighbors, classmates and co-workers and fellow parishioners. Church teaching has driven many of them away. Church teaching has significantly contributed to the shame and fear that so many have suffered. And if they survived, and are living full and healthy lives, it is usually in spite of our church.

Our church is not the only villain here. Most organized religions have played a role in creating an atmosphere of ignorance and hate. Parents who do not accept the sexuality of their children play a significant role. And parents like me have played a role. I loved my son and accepted his sexuality, but I failed in not understanding the power of the messages that made him feel unsafe and unaccepted.

The silence of these 30 or 40 bishops makes them complicit, part of the disrespect, part of the sustaining of an atmosphere of ignorance and hate. They have to be chagrined and embarrassed by some of the actions and statements of their colleagues. They have to know that a growing majority of Catholics are not in agreement with our church's attempt to prevent civil marriage for gays and lesbians. The issue is not our church's teaching on sacramental marriage and who can be married within the church, but rather our church's efforts in the policy arena to impose Catholic teaching on all of society, using a flawed application of the traditional Catholic natural law argument.

Isn't it time for these bishops to say "enough"? Isn't it time for them to stand up? They are the "good guys." They have compassion, intelligence and humility, all necessary ingredients for a heartfelt, credible, meaningful apology. Hopefully, they also have courage. Hopefully, they do not wish to remain complicit.

There are examples. A few years ago, in the San Francisco Bay area, at a funeral Mass for an elderly gay man, the priest celebrant got up and apologized to the deceased, his partner and his family and friends, for how the church had treated him during his life. It was a heartfelt apology and the impact was profound.

There are settings where this type of apology could be offered in a way that it could be heard and felt, in a way that could present opportunities for dialogue, and in a way that would feel welcoming, a feeling that has been all too absent for many Catholic gays and lesbians.

"Fortunate Families," a national organization of faithful Catholics who are parents of gay and lesbian children, has called for listening sessions with the bishops. The recent gathering at Fordham University, "Learning to Listen: Voices of Sexual Diversity and the Catholic Church," would have been a wonderful opportunity. And just the bishops' willingness to participate in such settings would speak volumes.

Some will say that an apology may not be much. I believe such an apology would be profound and healing for many gay and lesbian individuals and their families. It would be a significant step in restoring the bishops' teaching authority. It would be a gift of grace for the people of God.

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