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Pushing away the marginalized to reach out to the fringe

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

If Cardinal Francis George has proven anything over these past few weeks, it's not that he can tell the difference between white pride and gay pride.

When the cardinal attempted to make a connection between those fighting for equal rights for LGBT persons and those fighting for the right to assert the supremacy of the white race, he also demonstrated that he needs a history lesson.

By looking at the history of the KKK, he might discover a cautionary tale suited to a hierarchy that continues to reach out to fringe conservative groups to find solidarity in the culture wars.

What is often overlooked about the Ku Klux Klan is that they view themselves as a deeply Christian organization. Their beliefs are grounded in biblical literalism (according to their bible, of course, God's chosen people are of European descent). Their national director is an evangelical pastor. The banner on their website declares that they are "loving the family."

Perhaps most remarkably, they insist that their cross burnings are in fact "cross lightings" that "symbolizes the Light of Christ dispelling darkness and ignorance" and "reminds us of the cleansing 'fire' of Christ that cleanses evil from our land."

In its earlier incarnations, the Klan targeted Catholics primarily because of the church's support of immigrants and its allegiance to a "Roman dictator." Although it is unclear whether a Catholic was ever lynched, in the 1920s, a priest was shot dead by a high-ranking KKK member for officiating at a wedding of a Hispanic man and a white woman.

But the intolerance of Catholics changed in 1974. Facing dwindling numbers of Protestant white

supremacists, David Duke, leader of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, extended an invitation to Catholics -- provided, of course, that they were white.

Welcoming Catholics into the Klan not only helped to make the organization more mainstream, it also paid off in Duke's political career. When Duke won his bid for the Louisiana House of Representatives, he was elected in a district that was 80 percent Catholic. Two years later, in 1991, he ran for governor of the heavily Catholic state. The race was so close it forced a run-off election in which incumbent Gov. Edwin Edwards narrowly defeated Duke.

Duke managed to tap into an extreme segment of the Catholic laity who were intolerant of nonwhites and who believed Christian values can and should cleanse our godless culture.

The irony of Cardinal George's statement is that he likened LGBT persons to a fringe group of evangelical Christians during a time when the hierarchy appears to be bending over backward to appeal to fringe groups of evangelical Catholics and Christians.

Witness the development of the new ordinariate for Anglicans seeking asylum in the Roman Catholic Church. Facing dwindling numbers of priests and lay people in the United States and England, Pope Benedict XVI extended an invitation to the Catholic church to Anglicans -- provided, of course, that they opposed the ordination of women and the marriage of same-sex couples.

To make the transition smoother, the hierarchy put time, money and effort to develop an alternative system where entire Episcopal parishes could enter into communion with Rome en masse. There seems to be particular interest in the switch among Episcopalians in the conservative hotbeds in Texas -- like Houston, which will be the headquarters for the ordinariate.

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It's remarkable how a hierarchy that routinely appeals to the unchangeable nature of its doctrine of the priesthood to defend its stance against women's ordination can become so flexible about its priesthood when reaching out to those who will help toe their misogynist line. It's extraordinary the lengths the hierarchy will take to welcome a fringe group of evangelical Episcopalians who support their anti-gay marriage agenda.

This welcoming of fringe figures is also glaringly obvious on an individual level. When Newt Gingrich expressed interest in joining the Catholic fold, Monsignor Walter Rossi gladly offered him seven months of personalized, weekly catechetical lessons.

Rossi is the rector of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., where Callista -- Gingrich's mistress-of-seven-years-turned-wife -- sings in the choir. Gingrich, known to have left both of his ex-wives while they were seriously ill, was awarded two annulments and a sacramental marriage by the hierarchy.

How did Newt repay the church leaders who welcomed him so warmly? By painting himself as the crusader who would realize the new evangelism's wildest dreams of restoring moral order through politics and politicians.

Gingrich vowed to set up a special commission to examine the myriad ways that liberties guaranteed to religious groups (think Christian ones) are being compromised by issues like mandated coverage for

contraception, same-sex marriage rights and the overall secular destruction of our Christian society.

The real tragedy behind these stories is that the hierarchy is using its creativity, its money and, saddest of all, its sacraments to welcome individuals that will bolster its drive to exclude many of its baptized faithful.

The Roman Catholic Church is not like the KKK any more than LGBT people are like the KKK. However, there is a lesson to be learned from the story of David Duke's welcoming of fringe, conservative Catholics in an effort to save his organization, which was dying under the weight of its own moralism, antipathy and intolerance.

Our church was founded on Jesus' call to honor everyone's dignity as beloved children of God and to be one with the poor, the suffering and the outcast.

Today, we are watching our churches devolve into institutions that seek unity with those who share in certain unjust beliefs and solidarity with those who practice certain forms of discrimination.

A church that was founded to reach out to those on the margins is increasingly choosing to welcome only the fringe.

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