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Sighting the kingdom in Minneapolis

by Joe McHugh

VIEWPOINT

During the past few months, I've struggled hard to identify my current religious practice. Calling myself a religious dabbler trivializes my experience, and thinking of myself -- God forbid -- as a cafeteria Catholic doesn't quite hit the bull's-eye either. But since I like the safety of labels, "interreligionist" is about as close as I can get.

My religious sweet spot has me bouncing between two strikingly different religious traditions. One week I attend Mass: candles, sermon, sacrament. The next week I slip into the Quaker Meeting House for an hour of shared silence. No reading, no singing. Just silence, something I find too little of in Catholic churches. On the other hand, I go to Mass because I need sacrament. Besides a big difference in religious practice between the two, there is an equally wide divide over authority. While Catholics have hierarchy, the "priesthood of all believers" is a cornerstone belief for Quakers.

The Catholic church's hierarchy, I'm sad to say, appears committed to a headlong descent into a brittle, fundamentalist dogmatism -- that's dogma without expansion joints. My Quaker friends, however, have long lived and worshiped with lots of expansion joints, a dogma-free zone, if you like. While official Catholicism seems attached to answers, Quakers work hard to encourage questions.

Here is an example of how I see this being played out here in Minnesota.

Armed with savvy legal counsel to ensure tax exemption, the Minnesota Catholic Conference has launched an amazingly slick campaign "to develop and identify sponsorship for a constitutional amendment defining marriage as a union between one man and one woman." Failure to do so, we're instructed, will lead to colossal societal degeneration. It's simply a self-evident matter of natural law and dogma.

When I showed up at the Quaker Meeting House recently, my Irish Catholic sensibilities did a double take when I spied a notice reminding everyone that the marriage equality committee was meeting that afternoon.

After an hour of silent worship that morning, people stood to make announcements. One of them was from an older woman who urged folks to remember that the Old Lesbian Friends group was having its potluck lunch the next day. The Quaker tradition of tolerance and peace make questions about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and marriage an uncomplicated matter of social justice.

The next week I was in a beautiful old Catholic church in southeast Minneapolis. There were a couple of families there, few teenagers or young adults, but lots of gray hair, canes, walkers and hearing aids. It was there that I witnessed what I can only call a kingdom sighting that brought most dogma, lack of dogma, ideology or politics to their knees. The kingdom of God appeared suddenly and unexpectedly to me, in Hopkins? words ?like shining from shook foil.?

When the Communion line began to thin, a disabled older man sped down the center aisle in a power chair to receive Communion. There was a gay rainbow safety flag on the back of his chair with one word printed on it in red letters: pride. He was too old and too sick to do this to grandstand or protest; he just wanted to go to Communion. I wondered if anybody saw him as a Catholic embarrassment or annoyance.

As he made his way down the aisle and then received the Eucharist, in my mind's eye I saw every leper and paralytic, every blind person and cripple, all the tax collectors and prostitutes in the Gospels at his side. They all only wanted to be touched by Jesus and welcomed into a communion that is neither abstract nor theoretical.

It is to such as these, I remembered, that the kingdom of God belongs.

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