NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

An 'invitation to lunch' pastoral theology

NCR Editorial Staff | Apr. 9, 2012

Perhaps it is just a sign of the times that Catholics would be jolted reading that a cardinal, facing a difficult pastoral situation, would publicly acknowledge having asked himself: ?How would Jesus act??

That?s the question that Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, Austria, asked when considering whether he should let stand a pastor?s decision to prohibit a gay man in a registered domestic partnership to serve on a parish council.

In March, Florian Stangl, 26, was overwhelmingly elected to the position by gaining 96 of 142 votes cast by members of the parish. The pastor, Fr. Gerhard Swierzek, head of the small parish, intervened and, upholding church law against homosexual partnerships, asked him to renounce the position and also, according to reports, asked Stangl not to receive the Eucharist.

The archdiocese at first upheld the rule. Then Schönborn asked himself that question. And Stangl asked to speak to the cardinal.

Schönborn apparently decided that one thing Jesus would do is invite Stangl and his partner to lunch.

What he discovered over lunch, he said later, was that he was ?deeply impressed by [Stangl?s] faithful disposition, his humility, and the way in which he lives his commitment to service. I can therefore understand,? said the cardinal, ?why the inhabitants of Stützenhofen voted so decidedly for his participation in the parish council.? And then Schönborn suggested that the archdiocese would look into reworking the rules for pastoral elections, which currently require that candidates sign a declaration that they support all church teachings.

In a statement explaining his decision, Schönborn said, ?There are many parish councilors whose lifestyle does not fully conform to the ideals of the church. In view of the life witness that each of them gives taken as a whole, and their commitment to the attempt to live a life of faith, the church rejoices in their efforts.?

It is interesting that in the same week, news has circulated widely on the Internet and elsewhere of Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini?s view, expressed in the book *Believing and Knowing*, that while society should defend and support family life, ?it is not bad for two people to have some stability instead of occasional homosexual relationships, and in this regard the state could also favor them.?

Is it too much to suggest that Martini and Schönborn could be a leading edge of a shift in hierarchical thinking? After all, this is the first generation of prelates who have had to confront the reality that gays and lesbians will no longer remain a hidden ?problem.? They are openly part of our lives, our cultures, our faith communities, and will continue to be. They are no longer an abstraction to be spoken about, without challenge, as some theological or ethical curiosity.

The other thing Schönborn did was talk publicly about his wrestling with this issue, discussing it during an hourlong interview on Austrian television Palm Sunday night. These questions are part of the public discourse,

and he demonstrated that the church can be part of that discourse.

Schönborn revisited this issue in a homily directed to the priests of the archdiocese during the Chrism Mass on Tuesday of Holy Week and placed it into the larger question of pastoral care for Catholics whose lifestyles do ?not fully conform to the ideals of the church.? Rather than railing against people in gay partnerships, cohabitating heterosexuals, and divorced and remarried Catholics, Schönborn has said the church needs to embrace them in their faith journey.

Schönborn?s approach has attracted a great deal of notice, of course, because it is so strikingly different from so much of the confrontational policing of borders that goes on in the church these days. It doesn?t burden the laity with a requirement that the hierarchy, we know, would miserably fail as a class -- that all be perfect in every detail.

What if, for instance, the U.S. bishops had decided to invite theologian St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson for lunch -- even dinner -- to discuss her work before condemning it out of hand? What if Bishop Robert McManus of Worcester, Mass., had invited Victoria Kennedy to lunch to talk over whatever objection he may have to her as commencement speaker at Anna Maria College? What if these U.S. leaders would have taken into consideration these women?s ?life witness? as a whole? Both episodes might have had more civil, not to mention rational, endings.

Spending time with someone, especially breaking bread with someone, tends to soften the hard edges. It doesn?t negate principle, but it may make one hesitate, or even rethink, before publicly condemning someone.

The culture warriors among us might balk at such a strategy. At a distance, the lines always look sharper and more defined. It?s tough to keep warring against someone you?ve come to know a bit and whom you perceive as reasonable and well-intended.

Maybe seminaries should consider placing a great deal more emphasis on developing the ?invitation to lunch? as an integral part of pastoral theology programs.

Source URL (retrieved on *02/19/2017 - 20:56*): https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/invitation-lunch-pastoral-theology