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Church must change its ideas toward gay and lesbian employees

by Francis DeBernardo

Viewpoint

In 1995, at a major national conference for Catholic pastoral ministers, I had a conversation with a friend of mine who is a lesbian woman, observing that so many of the conference participants were openly lesbian and gay people. My friend commented, "If all the lesbian and gay church workers left their jobs, the church would be bereft!" We chuckled at such a thought, though realizing that it was unrealistic to consider that this possibility would occur.

Today, I am not so sure.

Within the space of three weeks, two news stories reported that gay musicians were fired from their church jobs as parish music director and school teacher/parish music director. These stories, one which took place in Charlotte, N.C., and one in St. Louis, shared a common theme: New York state's marriage equality law beckoned both workers to marry their partners with whom each shared a two-decade-long relationship.

In 2010, a lesbian administrator at Benedictine University in Springfield, Ill., lost her job when she placed a wedding announcement in a local newspaper; Marquette University in Milwaukee rescinded an offer of employment for a dean's position because of the candidate's academic writings on lesbians; a parish theology teacher with 28 years of experience was fired in Denver when she placed a personal ad for a companionable relationship on a website.

While these five cases might not signal a strong trend, they should strongly alert Catholics to a coming crisis in which my friend's prediction of a church without lesbian or gay workers could end up coming

true. Eight states and the District of Columbia now have marriage equality laws on the books. As more and more lesbian and gay couples take advantage of the protections and benefits these laws provide, more and more potential employment conflicts can erupt in church institutions.

A number of questions arise from these cases and the future they portend. How just is it to fire someone whose life or practices are not in accord with official church teaching? Where do you draw the line? Do you get fired if you have remarried without an annulment? Do you get fired if you don't attend Mass on Sunday regularly? Do you get fired because you are a Protestant who does not recognize the Catholic hierarchical structure?

A more theological question is how perfect do all church employees have to be? We are all sinners who fall way short of the mark. Will our church employ only people whose lives are near blameless? Is this the logical result of the smaller, more purified church that Pope Benedict XVI has envisioned? I wonder what St. Augustine of Hippo, scourge of Donatists and Pelagians, would have to say on this ecclesiological issue.

The church also needs to examine how to weigh adherence to sexual orthodoxy -- or any orthodoxy for that matter -- against a person's other characteristics: job performance, overall moral character, loyalty to the employing agency, to name just a few. In the two most recent incidents, news reports indicated that not only was there no problem with job performance in either case but, in fact, supervisors were aware of the nature of the employees' relationships. Does a relationship become problematic to employment only when it becomes public? Does serious sin only enter a relationship when the partners seek legal protection?

At the core of all these issues is the much more important question of the Catholic institution's poverty of discourse on the question of homosexuality. Because every issue concerning lesbian and gay people is seen through the lens of sexual ethics, there is precious little else that can be said that does not echo a sexual perspective. The contemporary hierarchy's focus on the sexual issues of lesbian and gay people has prevented these leaders from developing any other discourse on homosexuality. Catholic thought in the area of homosexuality desperately needs to mature beyond the level of "Don't."

For example, while church officials express in their documents that lesbian and gay people should be accepted with "compassion, respect, and sensitivity" (according to the catechism), why has this line of argument never been developed or applied to real-life situations with the vigor that the teaching on sexual expression is applied to policy questions of relationship and marriage? No hierarchical statements were issued when the national conversation was focused on the topic of bullying toward sexual and gender minorities that results in a higher rate of suicide for them. Similarly, there has been no serious thought given to the question of employment of lesbian and gay people other than in simply applying sexual prohibitions.

Austrian Cardinal Christoph Schönborn's recent support of the election of Florian Stangl, a partnered gay man, to his parish council offers a precedent that other prelates can emulate. Dialogue, not dismissal, was Schönborn's approach. (**See story.**)

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If the employment of lesbian and gay people in church institutions does not get resolved more positively than the recent American cases above exhibit, the church stands to lose its position as an effective agent for good in the world. Not only will the church lose the gifts, talents and expertise of the many lesbian

and gay people it currently employs, but church institutions with professional standing, such as hospitals and universities, will lose their ability to attract qualified personnel, both heterosexual and homosexual. For the good of gay and lesbian people, the church, the world and themselves, Catholic leaders need to learn to expand their ability to think, speak and act on homosexuality. If they don't, we will all be bereft.

[Francis DeBernardo is executive director of New Ways Ministry, whose members are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning Catholics and church personnel ministering to them.]

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