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Gay ministry group refuses to sign oath

by Brian Roewe

Following a more than yearlong investigation into the group's "adherence to the fullness of Catholic teaching," the future of a national association of ministries to gay and lesbian Catholics is uncertain because its board members refused to sign an "oath of personal integrity" to Catholic teaching given to them by the local bishop.

Declining the oath could result in Bishop Salvatore Cordileone of Oakland, Calif., declaring the Catholic Association for Lesbian and Gay Ministry, or CALGM, as "not authentically Catholic," a letter to its members from the association president warns.

"In good faith, we have done most everything required of us to maintain a legitimate space within the boundaries of the institutional Church," president Sheila Nelson wrote to members April 5. "Yet, this has not seemed to be adequate or satisfactory to the office of the bishop. We have repeatedly, abundantly and humbly submitted that our work is pastoral in nature and not political or primarily doctrinal."

The Oakland bishop declined *NCR's* request for comment. Mike Brown, the diocese's director of communications, issued a statement saying, "If the Bishop decides to make a public statement about the CALGM organization, he will then decide the best time and communication method to do so."

Cordileone's list of concerns with the association have included the omission of specific church documents on its website and publications; its use of the terms gay and lesbian; members' statements deemed critical of the church; and the backgrounds, affiliations and public statements of both conference speakers and board members.

In an April 12 letter to the association's board, Cordileone stated he would "take public action to clarify the status of CALGM with regard to authentic Catholic ministry" should they refuse to take an oath that requested that each member "strive to clearly present Catholic doctrine on homosexuality in its fullness"

and "profess personally to hold and believe, and practice all that the holy Catholic church teaches, believes and proclaims to be true, whether from the natural moral law or by way revelation from God through Scripture and tradition."

The board has twice rejected the bishop's request.

"That you would require such an unprecedented and extensive manifestation of our consciences suggests to us that, irrespective of our pastoral effectiveness, you wish to force an end to these, admittedly difficult, conversations. You will not be receiving any signed oaths from the Board members," Nelson wrote in a March 29 letter, the first informing the bishop of their decision.

Formed in 1994 as an independent 501(c)(3) charitable organization, CALGM is a nationwide network of gay outreach ministries. Its 200-plus members provide pastoral care for gay Catholics and their families in 25 states, and include nearly two dozen diocesan and parish ministries -- each independent and subject to its local pastor or diocese.

Casey Lopata, the cofounder of Fortunate Families and a longtime member of CALGM, said the network "keeps people connected ? rather than in isolation," but its importance extends beyond those in ministry.

"I think the importance is that the people in the pews understand that there is a Catholic-affiliated association that supports gay and lesbian people and their involvement within the church," he said.

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Though not an official organization of the U.S. bishops' conference, CALGM and its members interact regularly with bishops nationwide, and several bishops have spoken or celebrated the Eucharist at its national conventions. The association maintains an office and mailing address in Berkley, Calif., placing it under the watch of the Oakland bishop.

The investigation into the association and its "adherence to the fullness of Catholic teaching" began in late 2010 through a Dec. 22 letter from Cordileone. Since then, the two sides have met in person twice, and exchanged nearly a dozen letters.

CALGM defines itself as a pastoral outreach organization and views its mission as "setting the table" for gay Catholics, particularly those who feel unwelcome in the church. While it strives to present church teaching clearly, its board stated in an April 15, 2011, letter to Cordileone, the association does not view catechesis as one of its duties.

"We never speak anything opposed to Catholic teaching. Regardless, our focus is pastoral ministry, not catechesis. We bring people to a place where they can seek catechesis from their own parish or faith community," Arthur Fitzmaurice, a CALGM board member and its resource director, told *NCR*.

Cordileone addressed the group's alignment with Catholic teaching during a Jan. 7, 2011, meeting, described as productive and "truly a dialogue" by Fitzmaurice.

The association's correspondence with Cordileone following that meeting, which *NCR* obtained, details the steps the board took to address some of the bishop's concerns, while at the same time explains their unwillingness to meet others.

In an eight-page follow-up letter to the January meeting, dated April 15, 2011, the board sought to clarify

questions about the association and its stance on several of the bishop's concerns, one of which was its usage of the terms "gay" and "lesbian" on its website and in its publications -- a concern that "honestly surprised" the board.

Fitzmaurice said that Cordileone said during their Jan. 7 meeting that the terms weren't in the church's vocabulary, and were promoted by groups opposed to the church's moral teaching.

The board pointed out it in the letter that archdiocesan ministries in Los Angeles and Chicago use "gay" and "lesbian" in their titles. In addition, the Oakland diocese has a page titled "Gay and Lesbian Ministry" under the family life ministries section of its website.

"The average Catholic who identifies as gay or lesbian is not making a statement about their sexual activity, their political party, their views on same-sex marriage, or their 'lifestyle.' ... these terms are actually used to shift the focus away from sexual behavior (which "homosexual" clearly evokes) toward the matters of orientation and identity, which are acknowledged by the Church," the letter stated.

The board agreed to "be more conscientious of our use of language," and to utilize Church language -- "persons with a homosexual inclination" -- when presenting church teaching, and "gay" and "lesbian" when communicating with those to whom they minister.

The letter also addressed Cordileone's concern about quotes from members in newsletters he deemed antithetical to church teachings. One statement the bishop highlighted came from the February 2004 RECLAIM newsletter:

"Some of the biggest challenges to the ministry do not come from within the parish or archdiocese. They come from the negative language of some church documents on homosexuality and the ongoing publicizing of it by the Catholic and secular media."

The board said the passage came from parents of a homosexually-oriented high school boy who thought he could not be confirmed, and reflected "the frequently voiced and misunderstood language of "intrinsically disordered" and "inclined to evil" -- words used in church teachings, but ones that most lay people don't understand and find offensive, demeaning and alienating.

While the board acknowledged both the family "clearly lacked an understanding of the fullness of Catholic teaching," the phrases the boy heard in his confirmation class concerning homosexual persons "told him clearly that he did not belong -- and that he was seen as less than whole. "

"This is the kind of misunderstanding that CALGM strives to correct. It is our hope that Church teaching can be clearly presented without the use of language that causes confusion and sometimes alienation," the board explained.

In the future, the board agreed to be more vigilant in what it posts and publishes, and to include editorial comments when necessary to minimize potential misunderstanding.

Ensuing letters detailed the association's progress in implementing Cordileone's requests, including:

- modifying website content to include specific church documents;
- adding editorial remarks to opinions criticizing or inaccurately portraying church teachings, and stating CALGM did not share in them;
- Using church language -- "persons with a homosexual inclination" -- when presenting church teaching, and "gay" and "lesbian" when communicating with whom they minister;

- providing the bishop a copy of each newsletter before distribution to members;
- Continuing the practice of providing the names of proposed speakers to the bishop of the diocese where conferences are held.

While the board could directly address many of Cordileone's concerns, it said it required a broader discussion with their members before acting on others.

An Oct. 2 letter detailed the discussion at its Sept. 22-25 conference in Albany, N.Y., where the board presented members with proposed -- and ultimately declined -- revisions to the association's goals, intended to demonstrate their adherence to church teaching.

Members worried one goal -- "to provide resources and opportunities to facilitate educating those we serve on the fullness of Catholic Church teaching, especially as it relates to persons with a homosexual orientation" -- would go beyond the scope of CALGM's pastoral ministry.

"Adding this as a goal would somewhat change what we do as an organization," Fitzmaurice told *NCR*. "And using language like 'persons with a homosexual inclination' reduces the person to sexual behavior. Having that on our website would pose a barrier to people who are concerned about whether they will be treated with respect if they approach an organization pertaining to gay and lesbian issues in the church."

"Our members expressed concern that echoing the language used by Courage about sexual behavior would cause confusion that would impede the work of pastoral outreach ministries that strive to reach alienated and questioning Catholics, the very people that Courage turns away," the letter stated. Courage is an alternate gay ministry endorsed by the church that focuses on sexual behavior.

Members were also worried that describing CALGM with theological language on the website "would create an obstacle to ministry," and "were adamant that our language remain pastoral rather than doctrinal so as not to drive away those most in need of our support and of connection to the faith community," the board wrote.

"Mainly we're a pastoral organization, and if we fail in that role, [we] fail the people we set out to serve," said Fitzmaurice.

"The Church clearly has legitimate demands to make of us -- but like Christ we need to begin with words of acceptance and love to these seekers so their response will grow out of love rather than fear or hopelessness. This welcoming attitude must be evident on our website," the board's letter explained.

In their second meeting, Feb. 1, 2012, Cordileone expanded upon his initial concerns, raising questions about speakers at the association's conferences, as well as board members' affiliations and public statements.

According to Fitzmaurice, the bishop said he wanted to affirm CALGM as a pastoral ministry association, but first required each board member to demonstrate adherence to the fullness of Catholic teaching by signing an "oath of personal integrity," or to leave the board if they had ties to organizations perceived as contrary to church teaching.

Fitzmaurice told *NCR* the request for an oath was "inappropriate, unprecedented and potentially detrimental to Church ministry."

"We've always maintained that we affirm the fullness of Catholic teaching in our conversations with him. ... As an association, all of our activities are in line with the fullness of Catholic teaching," he said.

The board declined the request for resignations in a Feb. 10 letter, and offered to submit and sign an oath written by the board. In his response letter March 5, Cordileone supplied his oath, which began by having each board member affirm the church's commitment to the pastoral concerns and support of gay Catholics and their families, and included a series of "I affirm and believe" statements regarding the definitions of marriage, purgatory and hell; the belief that Communion is available only under a state of grace; and church positions on chastity and cloning, among others.

Cordileone indicated that the purpose of the oath was not for the board to begin teaching church doctrine immediately in its outreach, which he acknowledged would be counteractive to their ministry, but rather to give assurance to the pastoral effectiveness of their ministry by way of each board member affirming the truths he outlined.

The bishop gave a deadline of April 2 for the oaths to be returned to him, and if not, he would "proceed to take whatever action he deemed necessary."

Nelson, in a March 29 letter, informed the Oakland bishop the board would not take his oath: "In the course of our conversations with you over the last year, we have endeavored to engage and respond to each of the concerns that you have raised about our pastoral ministry."

She continued: "Sadly, there always seems to be something that you say 'confirms [your] doubts' about us and our work. ... We have tried to gain your trust ... We have tried to assure you that we are faithful disciples in parishes and dioceses doing the pastoral work of the Church ..."

"We hope you can understand, then, our confusion at the 'Oath of Personal Integrity in Belief and Practice Regarding the Teachings of the Catholic Church.' Suddenly, the terms of our long conversation have migrated from the work of the Association to the personal lives of the Board members," she said.

At the end of the letter, Nelson expressed hope that CALGM would continue a ministry she called a "tremendous value to you and our Church at a time when conventional wisdom would inaccurately characterize Roman Catholicism as 'against gay people,'" adding, "For our part, we need you and your apostolic service to hold us in deep communion with the Body of Christ. We hope and pray that we can continue to minister with you in the Church we all love."

Responding April 12, Cordileone requested the board reconsider and respond to him -- even if to ask more questions or continue the discussion -- by May 14, after his *ad limina* visit to Rome. The bishop said he would "proceed to take public action to clarify the status of CALGM with regard to authentic Catholic ministry" if they still declined the oath.

The board responded May 10 in a brief, three-paragraph letter, saying they have communicated to Cordileone "all that we have been able to communicate" and "hope to continue in dialogue with you and other Church leaders."

When asked how or if CALGM would continue its ministry should Cordileone declare it not authentically Catholic, Fitzmaurice stated that "the need for our ministry remains, and we will continue to do our pastoral work and will respond to opportunities for dialogue with our Church leaders."

Lopata said it would be "a real loss for the church" if CALGM could not continue its work.

"If there's not that visible association with this positive perspective for gay and lesbian people within the church that is recognized by the church, the church would be much impoverished because of that," he said.

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