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Boy Scouts' discriminatory policy finds no support in Catholic teachings

by Casey and Mary Ellen Lopata

Commentary

Because the U.S. Catholic hierarchy strongly opposes legislation that would grant lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people fuller equality, Catholics can be forgiven for assuming that church teaching always supports one particular "side" in our country's culture wars.

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The Boy Scouts of America, for instance, have recently reaffirmed their policy of excluding gay boys and gay leaders from that organization. At first blush, the scouts' position might seem consistent with our bishops' increasingly hard line on LGBT issues, but we believe a closer reading of the church's teaching should lead Catholics to resist this wrongheaded and wrong-hearted policy.

As early as 1976, in *To Live in Christ Jesus: A Pastoral Reflection on the Moral Life*, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (then known as the National Conference of Catholic Bishops) wrote that, rather than being ostracized, gays and lesbians "should have an active role in the Christian community."

The church's hierarchy is in no way more progressive now than it was then, yet the bishops returned to this theme in their 1998 pastoral message *Always Our Children*:

The teachings of the Church make it clear that the fundamental human rights of homosexual persons must be defended and that all of us must strive to eliminate any forms of injustice, oppression, or violence against them (cf. *The Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, 1986, no. 10). It is not sufficient only to avoid unjust discrimination. Homosexual persons "must be accepted with

respect, compassion and sensitivity" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2358).

The bishops solidify this theme in their recommendation to "Welcome homosexual persons into the faith community."

The Boy Scouts have chosen not to accept gay boys age 11-17 with respect, compassion and sensitivity. They have chosen instead to reject them at precisely that time when gay youth need the support of their communities most.

Peer-reviewed research establishes that LGBT youth are at far greater risk of social isolation, parental rejection, depression, verbal harassment, physical violence and suicide than their heterosexual counterparts. The leaders of any organization dedicated to young people's well-being are familiar with this data. They know gay boys need the sort of nurturing that organizations like the Boy Scouts provide.

Yet, for reasons they have not articulated, the scouts have chosen to continue ostracizing these vulnerable adolescents, thereby subjecting them to another rejection that can only exacerbate the risks they already face.

As parents of a straight son who was a scout and a gay son who was not, we'd like to know the scouts' reasoning. Some writers have speculated that the anonymous panel convened to review the matter was made aware that many scouts come from Catholic and Mormon families, and that these two churches sponsor large numbers of scout troops.

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If the scouts accepted gay boys into their troops, the reasoning goes, these churches might react negatively, leading to a significant thinning in the ranks. We can only pray that this wasn't the case. There is nothing in official church teaching that justifies the scouts' discriminatory policy, and it is up to us, as Catholics, to make that clear.

In central Massachusetts, 15 scout leaders wrote to their local newspaper disassociating themselves from the scouts' policy: "We want to reassure you, our friends, neighbors and colleagues, that ... Troop 500 invites the participation of all interested 11-to-17-year-old boys and their parents or guardians without regard to sexual orientation."

We call on Catholic bishops, parishes, schools and parents to take similar action. The Boy Scouts have made a significant moral miscalculation, and the church has an opportunity to help them to correct it.

We can begin by making it clear that gay boys, some just beginning to realize their orientation, are welcome in all Catholic-sponsored scout troops. We must say now what our bishops have been saying for years: God loves every human person, and we cannot do less.

[Casey and Mary Ellen Lopata are the co-founders of Fortunate Families, a national network of Catholic parents and family members of LGBT people and a member of the Equally Blessed coalition.]

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