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Small tents for small hearts

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As recently as a decade ago or so, we were a "big tent" culture -- but now the tent is getting very small, and so are the people still in it.

Bill Clinton talked about "the third way," bringing together moderates of all political stripes; George W. Bush campaigned on "compassionate conservatism"; and over in Rome, the traditionalist Pope John Paul II nonetheless created a broad-based excitement for the church through the force of his personality and the generosity of his worldview.

Today, life under the Big Top isn't what is used to be -- Republicans seem to be dragged ever-further-rightward by small factions of their party; cable news divides itself up into ideological camps; and the Vatican appears to be very serious about a wish expressed by some inside the Curia: Better to have a smaller church of fiercely true-believers than a bigger tent of people who don't toe the theological line.

The latest example: Next week, Archbishop-designate Salvatore Cordileone will formally become the leader of the Catholic church in San Francisco. He is, by all accounts, a talented, vibrant and engaging man who speaks Italian and Spanish fluently. But in a city noted for its tolerance (and as the place where people leave their hearts), Cordileone's appointment sends a small-tent message.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the archbishop-designate was one of the key figures in the successful campaign for Proposition 8 -- the California ballot initiative (since overturned by the courts) that outlawed same-sex marriage. Cordileone, in fact, heads a subcommittee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops for the promotion and defense of marriage.

His advice for gay and lesbian couples: chastity. He says that through chastity, their lifestyle may be a "call to holiness." Cordileone does admit chastity isn't easy: "It takes a lot of spiritual discipline. Certainly

our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters need to be supported in living out a call to holiness." He also told the *Times* that gays and lesbians involved in sexual relationships of any kind should not receive Holy Communion.

Regarding other church teaching often up for discussion in a town like San Francisco, Cordileone told the *Times*: "The solution isn't to say, 'Well, I'm going to disagree and continue being a Catholic.' That's not how we arrive at holiness."

Cordileone is, then, a clear choice from the Vatican. For San Francisco, they could have chosen someone who was something less of a flashpoint, but that is not the Roman style these days. The possibility that lock-step conformity free of discussion and debate may drive many from the church seems not to be a concern, but rather a welcome by-product of necessary doctrinal rigidity.

The tent is shrinking all around us, on many fronts. That may be all right in politics, where people can move from party to party, go independent or just sit the whole thing out. But few people want to sit out salvation, sit out faith, sit out Jesus.

But the small tent tells them: tough luck.

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