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French bishops offer solidarity with gay Catholics

by Pat Perriello

NCR Today

The French bishops have prepared a statement that explores the church's response to the gay and lesbian community concerning civil unions and gay marriage. What a refreshing approach they are taking to such an issue that matters to the world around them.

In another example of bishops around the world taking a more open stance toward issues confronting all humanity, the German bishops are looking at permitting the use of the morning-after pill in certain circumstances.

In contrast, the US Catholic bishops always seem to be looking for what is wrong with whatever stance any non-Catholic group around the world may take. Consider the issue of homosexuality and church teaching. The church teaches that homosexual acts are sinful. The church also preaches the worth, value and dignity of every human person. Therefore, one can conclude that homosexual relationships are sinful unless there is complete abstinence from sexual activity. One could also conclude that homosexuals are human beings deserving of humane and just treatment. Such a view would therefore demand a just and living wage, nondiscriminatory housing, and a right to be free from hateful speech and violent acts. Although the church seems to have difficulty with this reality, it is actually possible to hold both positions at the same time.

In short, there is every reason for the church to support and demand fair treatment for all people, including homosexuals. There is every reason for the church to raise its voice clearly against discrimination and violence against gay and lesbian individuals. Yet instead, in this country, we hear only what is wrong with homosexual behavior, and the general public can only conclude that the church supports and perhaps even encourages mistreatment and discrimination against our gay and lesbian brethren.

What a difference we see from the French bishops. They are actively exploring ways to affirm the personhood of homosexuals. They acknowledge church teaching against homosexual marriage but recognize the civil nature of relationships as well. They therefore contend that granting gay couples access to the civil rights that marriage accords does not violate the church's opposition to gay marriage.

In other words, the French bishops choose to respond to gays and lesbians in their midst with love, support and an attempt to be sensitive to their needs as part of the family of man. I believe we could call such a position one that is predicated on Gospel values. The alternative, to condemn and express outrage that anyone would even think of trying to be fair and provide outreach to this group of citizens, does not seem in keeping with the values enshrined in the Gospels.

The point I am trying to make is that both groups of bishops are in conformity with Catholic doctrine, but it is the French bishops that best exemplify the pastoral instincts of the Good Shepherd. It also seems that German bishops are now about to approve morning-after pills to prevent pregnancy in the case of rape. It is indeed encouraging to observe that around the world bishops are beginning to look to the people and try to determine ways they can help them. It is my fervent hope that the American bishops will one day soon come to understand that they can be true to church doctrine and still approach issues from the point of view of meeting the needs of all the members of their community.

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