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Another Vatican voice backs civil unions for same-sex couples

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today
Pope Francis

Another veteran Vatican figure has signaled openness to civil recognition of same-sex unions in the wake of similar comments in early February from the Vatican's top official on the family. It's a position also once reportedly seen with favor by the future pope while he was still Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

The latest expression of support for civil recognition as an alternative to gay marriage comes from Archbishop Piero Marini, who served for 18 years as Pope John Paul II's liturgical master of ceremonies.

"There are many couples that suffer because their civil rights aren't recognized," Marini said.

Marini, now 71, is currently the president of the Pontifical Committee for International Eucharistic Congresses. He spoke in an interview with the newspaper *La Nación* in Costa Rica, where the local church wrapped up a Eucharistic congress Sunday.

Though Marini has no responsibility to frame policy on matters of marriage, his comments may reopen questions about the Vatican's line in the wake of a similar position expressed in early February by Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, president of the Pontifical Council for the Family.

During a Vatican news conference Feb. 4, Paglia said while the church is opposed to anything that treats other unions as equivalent to marriage between a man and a woman, it could accept "private law solutions" for protecting people's rights.

In some quarters, that comment was styled as undercutting bishops in both France and the United States who at the time were fighting off proposals for gay marriage, though Paglia insisted it's not what he meant.

The Marini comments may also reawaken interest in the new pope's history on the issue.

On March 19, *The New York Times* reported that when Argentina was gearing up for a bitter national debate on gay marriage in 2009 and 2010, Bergoglio quietly favored a compromise solution that would have included civil unions for same-sex couples.

That report was denied by Miguel Woites, director of the Argentinian Catholic Information Agency, a news outlet linked to the Buenos Aires archdiocese. Woites insisted Bergoglio would "never" have favored any legal recognition of same-sex unions and said the *Times* report was a "complete error."

In early April, however, a senior official in the Argentine bishops' conference told *NCR* that Bergoglio did, in fact, favor civil unions.

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Mariano de Vedia, a veteran journalist for Argentina's leading daily, told *NCR* he could confirm Bergoglio's position had been correctly described in the *Times* account.

Guillermo Villarreal, a Catholic journalist in Argentina, said it was well known at the time that Bergoglio's moderate position was opposed by Archbishop Héctor Rubén Aguer of La Plata, the leader of the hawks. The difference was not over whether to oppose gay marriage, but how ferociously to do so and whether there was room for a compromise on civil unions.

Villareal described the standoff over gay marriage as the only vote Bergoglio ever lost during his six years as president of the conference.

Speaking Sunday on an Italian cable news network, church historian Alberto Melloni, seen as a voice of the progressive wing of Italian Catholicism, predicted that "sooner or later, this openness [to civil unions] will arrive in the magisterium of the pope." However, Melloni also said he believes Francis will move with "caution" and "prudence."

On other matters, Marini said in his interview in Costa Rica that the election of Francis has generated a "different air of freedom" in the Vatican, "opening a window onto springtime and hope."

Marini also expressed a degree of skepticism about the papacy's growing use of social media, including Twitter: "The church shouldn't be antiquated," he said, "but you also have to exercise a bit of caution."

The interview with Marini appears in the April 21 edition of *La Nación*; the following is an *NCR* translation. *La Nación's website has the original in Spanish.*

For you, what has the change in the papacy meant?

It's a breath of fresh air, it's opening a window onto springtime and onto hope. We had been breathing the waters of a swamp, and it had a bad smell. We'd been in a church afraid of everything, with problems such as Vatileaks and the pedophilia scandals. With Francis we're talking about positive things; he puts the emphasis on the positive and talks about offering hope.

Can you describe the atmosphere that prevails now in the Vatican?

In these first days of his pontificate there's a different air of freedom, a church that's closer to the poor and less problematic. He doesn't like living surrounded by great paintings and gold.

With these humble gestures, is he calling priests back to their vow of poverty?

The call is to ask ourselves, who are the poor today? They're those, for example, who don't know if they'll be able to eat tomorrow. Priests must give an example of a moderate and simple life.

Does it suggest that priests ought to get out of the sanctuaries and share with those in need?

Without a doubt. The new pope has said that pastors ought to have the smell of their sheep, which means living their lives and faith from within the community.

In your 18 years as master of ceremonies for John Paul II, what did you learn from being next to a man who was so admired?

I learned his simplicity. He was a very simple, spontaneous person, with great ideas to share with people. He liked to stay with the faithful after Mass, chatting with them. He had worked in a mine, and therefore he knew the reality and the needs of the people.

Is there any conversation, phrase or memory that you've held onto with special affection from John Paul II?

I remember we were at World Youth Day in the Philippines, when John Paul II celebrated my 52nd birthday. I had never before blown the candles on a cake, and he brought together a number of people for me to celebrate. He was very friendly, cheerful and spontaneous.

How can young people become more integrated into the Church?

It is one of the most important problems we face, and a challenge for the Catholic Church. Today, we're seeing a break in the passage of the testimony of faith from one generation to another. We must recover that message, and the necessity of communication within the family; for instance, the idea that children should obey their parents.

Pope Benedict XVI used Twitter as a means of communication, do you think it was effective?

For my part I wouldn't have used Twitter, but the pope was advised to do it. The church shouldn't be antiquated, but you also have to exercise a bit of caution.

Costa Rica has opened a discussion about what it means to be a secular state. What do you think of these decisions?

This is already a reality in Europe. A secular state is fine, but if it turns into a secularist state, meaning hostile to the Catholic Church, then there's something wrong. Church and state should not be enemies to

one another. In these discussions, it's necessary, for instance, to recognize the union of persons of the same sex, because there are many couples that suffer because their civil rights aren't recognized. What can't be recognized is that this [union] is equivalent to marriage.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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