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Dolan, Gays and the Boys Scouts

Richard Gaillardetz | May. 21, 2013
Commentary

On Easter Sunday, New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan appeared on national television and reaffirmed Catholic teaching regarding the impermissibility of same-sex marriage. He admitted however that the Catholic church must ensure ?that our defense of marriage is not reduced to an attack on gay people. And I admit, we haven?t been too good at that.?

For Dolan and most other bishops, church teaching on sexual morality is not a matter for open debate. What *is* open for discussion, Dolan suggests, is the consistency of the Catholic witness regarding the inalienable dignity and value of gay and lesbian persons. If the Catholic Church is to make good on the claim that it is not anti-gay, then it will have to stand up for the rights of gays and lesbians with the same force with which it has stood up for the dignity of the unborn and the rights of immigrants.

Dolan is president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. In that capacity, he might encourage his brother bishops to consider whether the public policy positions of the bishops? conference are giving a consistent testimony to the essential distinction in Catholic teaching between the dignity and value of gay and lesbian persons, and the impermissibility of same-sex marriage. They might begin by assessing the U.S. Catholic church?s traditional support of the Boy Scouts of America. After all, Catholic parishes sponsor approximately 10 percent of the Boy Scout troops in the United States. The U.S. bishops conference even has an official episcopal liaison to the National Catholic Committee on Scouting.

My own family has been deeply involved in scouting for years. I have four sons, three of whom are Eagle Scouts and the fourth soon will be. My son Andrew is not only an Eagle Scout; he served as senior patrol leader of his Catholic troop. He also spent three summers as a leader at a Boy Scout summer camp where he shared responsibility for the daily operation of the camp. Because of his reputation for relating well to the younger scouts, whenever boys became homesick or there was a disciplinary issue, more often than not they were sent to Andrew for counseling and support. Unfortunately, because of current Boy Scout policy, that is a role he can no longer play. During his freshman year of college Andrew publicly acknowledged his same-sex orientation and was therefore no longer allowed to serve as a scout leader.

The Boy Scouts of America are in the midst of a reconsideration of their longstanding opposition to gays as scouts and scout leaders. Consequently, a public statement by Catholic bishops supporting a change in scouting policy would go a long way toward demonstrating that church teaching does not justify discrimination against gays and lesbians.

The official position of the Boy Scouts of America is irreconcilable with the Catholic teaching on the dignity of gay and lesbian persons and its careful distinction between sexual orientation and sexual behavior. Allowing gay youth to join the Boy Scouts and allowing gay and lesbian adults to serve as leaders is not condoning homosexual behavior; it is a matter of recognizing the fundamental dignity of gays and lesbians and their right not to be discriminated against because of their sexual orientation. Catholic teaching insists, as Dolan reiterated, that homosexual persons are created in the image and likeness of God and are deserving of our love and respect.

Though few will state it publicly, one of the arguments against admitting homosexuals as adult scout leaders is the unsubstantiated belief that homosexuals are more prone to sexual abuse of children than are heterosexuals. Similarly fallacious arguments have been made regarding the predilection of Roman Catholic clergy to sexual abuse of children. Consequently, one would think that Catholic church leadership would be particularly sensitive to such unjust assumptions. Yet the silence of Catholic leadership regarding the Boy Scout controversy has been deafening.

If Dolan wants the Catholic church to do a better job demonstrating that it is not anti-gay, he might encourage the bishops? conference to declare publicly its opposition to any scout policy that would either prohibit gay youth from joining a scout troop or gays and lesbians from serving as adult scout leaders. If the bishops were to call for Catholic parishes to disaffiliate with any scout troop that perpetuates BSA?s current discriminatory policy they would gain some badly needed credibility as defenders of the dignity of all persons, regardless of gender, race, age or sexual orientation.

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