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Seattle high school administers 'a vaccine against faith'

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

Pope Francis, we've learned by now, likes to speak in metaphors. Some of his figures of speech have become so compelling that they land on the lips of Catholics around the world within hours after he says them and are quoted with the solemnity of a time-tested aphorism.

Priests should be "shepherds who have the smell of their sheep."

If the church doesn't find "new balance," it "is likely to fall like a house of cards."

The church is a "field hospital after battle."

Priests who receive poor formation become "little monsters."

As captivating as they are to the religious imagination, Francis' metaphors have also proven vulnerable to misinterpretation. Such was the case this weekend after the publication of a report on a speech the pope gave in November to 120 leaders of the Union of Superiors General, the main international umbrella group for communities of religious priests and brothers.

In the course of the address, Francis rightly pointed out the new pastoral challenges that have come with ministering to children whose parents are divorced, divorced and remarried, or in same-sex relationships.

Reflecting on the story of a "very sad little girl" who was troubled because she felt unloved by her mother's fiancée, Francis asked the male religious, "How can we proclaim Christ to a generation that is changing?" Then, answering his own question, he replied, "We must be careful not to administer a vaccine against faith to them."

In Italy, where the Democratic Party just announced that support for the legal recognition of same-sex unions would be part of their electoral platform, Francis' figure of speech was quickly decoded as a sign of papal support for civil unions.

Like so many of Francis' metaphors, this one, and its very progressive interpretation, went viral.

That was until Jesuit Fr. Antonio Spadaro, author of the report on Francis' address, set the record straight.

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Arguing that Francis' words are being twisted by Catholics on both the left and the right, Spadaro offered a helpful corrective. "Mercy doesn't mean justifying sin, but tenderly reaching out to the humanity for which Christ went to the Cross," he explained in a front-page essay in Italy's newspaper of record, *Corriere della Sera*.

Spadaro, who is rumored to be the Vatican's next chief spokesman, clarifies a point that has caused much confusion in the general perception of Francis' understanding of same-sex relationships. Francis believes gays and lesbians should be treated with compassion and welcome, but he will continue to insist that same-sex relationships are sinful.

Spadaro's rendering of Francis' beliefs is right on target, and LGBT Catholics and those who support them would be wise to hear Spadaro's words as if they'd come from Francis himself.

Francis upholds the church's doctrine, a teaching he even reaffirmed in his now legendary "Who I am to judge?" statement: While the condition of homosexuality is not in itself a sin, same-sex acts are sinful. This is why he still refuses to sanction civil unions or same-sex marriage.

In his latest metaphorical lesson on how to treat the children of same-sex parents, Francis instructs church ministers to be compassionate and welcoming enough toward gay and lesbian parents that their children will not have an aversion to the faith.

What Francis may come to realize is that, especially when it comes to the new generation's understanding of same-sex relationships, treating same-sex couples with mercy will not be enough to constitute what they see as true justice. Mercy implies that a sin has taken place. But more and more Catholics are realizing that same-sex relationships should not be treated like sin, but rather with full equality.

The overwhelming support of young adult Catholics for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons has been well documented by polls and Pew research studies. But these statistics have come to life in Seattle, where students at Eastside Catholic School are participating in an ongoing protest over the firing of beloved vice principal and coach Mark Zmuda.

Zmuda is one in a string of lesbian and gay Catholic school employees who have been fired for seeking equal protection under the law through a same-sex marriage. Though the school insists that Zmuda resigned, the former vice principal charges that not only was he fired for marrying his partner but, in a great twist of Catholic irony, he was even told by school officials that he could be reinstated if he divorced.

In response, Eastside students have organized a movement against of the school's decision, demanding answers and accountability from Eastside's administration. In a remarkable show of solidarity, students

from neighboring Catholic high schools having joined in what has been named the "Keep Mr. Z 2013" crusade.

Last weekend, about 100 students gathered across the street from Seattle's St. James Cathedral, offering a list of challenges to Eastside Catholic administrators and the archdiocese.

"[T]he continued mistreatment of the gay community within the Catholic Church is unbecoming of the Gospel message we are all called to recognize. We will continue to write letters, lobby Church officials, and use any other means at our disposal to respectfully work toward our ultimate goal of changing the discriminatory attitudes regarding homosexuality in the Church," they said in a statement.

When Zeena Rivera, a student on the picket line, was asked what she would say to Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain (yes, the same archbishop overseeing the reform of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious) if he came across the street to speak with protestors, her response was telling:

"I'd ask him: Why are you doing this? Why is this in any way related to what it means to be Catholic? I've been Catholic for the past 17 years. I don't see that this falls in line with Catholic teachings of how to live."

These Catholic high school students are genuinely perplexed over why the institutional church continues to regard same-sex relationships as sinful and unworthy of equal treatment. They are not alone. Ask your average high school teacher or college professor in a Catholic educational setting, and most of them will tell you that the majority of students agree with the kids at Eastside.

Francis' question is a good one: How can the church proclaim Christ to a generation that is changing?

These students are demonstrating clearly that it will take more than treating gay and lesbian Catholics as sinners in need of mercy to ensure that they do not receive a vaccine against their faith.

Some vaccines are administered in a series of three shots. If the archdiocesan and school officials continue to stonewall these students, they will, in effect, be administering the first immunity-building shot.

The second shot will come if the institutional church refuses to hear their voices and listen to their experiences of same-sex couples. (The new generation grew up on the Internet, so the idea of not having one's voice heard is not only unfathomable, it's utterly foreign.)

The final shot against the faith will come if the students are faced with a church that views the same-sex relationships of their beloved family, friends and teachers as sins in need of mercy rather than relationships that deserve dignity, respect and protection equal to heterosexual couples.

[Jamie L. Manson is *NCR* books editor. She received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her *NCR* columns have won numerous awards, most recently second prize for Commentary of the Year from Religion Newswriters (RNA). Her email address is jmanson@ncronline.org.]

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