

Gay educator caught in the middle

Ken Briggs | Jan. 24, 2014 NCR Today

Who is to judge Mark Zmuda, the vice principal fired by Seattle's Eastside Catholic School for announcing his intention to marry his gay partner?

This is the kind of dilemma posed by Pope Francis' "who am I to judge" comment about homosexuals during his flight back to Rome from South America.

Students and parents are angrily protesting the ousting of the popular Zmuda. Everyone knew he was gay; the firing offense was that he was getting into a same-sex marriage. Some parents took the pope at his word: Why indeed judge Zmuda?

? Francis' sentiments have become a mantra for many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender advocates as meaning gay and lesbian sexuality is within the bounds of moral approval. The anathema visited upon homosexual acts by the Vatican ("intrinsically disordered") is believed to have been superseded by the pope's tolerance in the view of these hopeful thinkers. And who's to blame them for the optimism in that ray of hope?

But in the real world of the Seattle archdiocese, decisions are supposed to be guided by official church teaching. The Catholic church's opposition to same-sex marriage isn't just advice. Practically speaking, it's church law. What option do Archbishop J. Peter Sartain and the Eastside administration have but to follow the rule?

Nothing the pope has said gets to a particular case such as this and others that are cropping up. Perhaps that's what the pope intends. He utters a personal vision of how things should be, even contrary to church teaching, hoping it will spark a grassroots debate that will eventually bring about change. Let a wholesale discussion work it out. He has endorsed a much more communal, conciliar church, so maybe he's playing the role of catalyst.

For the archbishop to contravene church teaching would be an entirely different matter. He could exercise his conscience in favor of Zmuda, but the penalty he would surely pay -- reprimand and possible dismissal -- would presumably be the same as if an enlightened pope weren't in charge. The sentiment has little to do with the judgment on the ground, as it's turning out.

Zmuda had apparently stayed on the right side of the church law by identifying himself as gay without being directly tied to homosexual eroticism, which the church condemns. "Ask not, tell not" gave him a respected place at the school. Marrying your partner removes doubt. Without some kind of clearance from Rome, what could Sartain realistically do even if he wanted to?

The church's moral judgment on Zmuda and others caught in similar gaps between papal ideals and concrete rules is causing confusing and allegations of hypocrisy. No matter how much students and parents sympathize with Zmuda and invoke the pope's words to bolster their cause, the law is still the judge.

Years ago, bishops often blamed the growing dissent among Catholics on "confusion" over church teachings, though most understood quite well but disagreed. Now we have cause for actual confusion on other grounds.

Something dramatic may yet narrow that gap, but unless and until it does, it may be difficult to find the right judge.

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