

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

February 25, 2014 at 7:43am

Uganda's Anti-Gay Laws

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Distinctly Catholic

Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni signed a law passed by that nation's parliament that increases penalties for homosexual acts, acts which had been proscribed by law since colonial times but rarely enforced. The socio-cultural situation is different from that discussed yesterday in Arizona, but the challenge to Catholic orthodoxy posed by these instances of anti-gay bigotry is the same and that challenge is foundational.

Western governments, including President Obama, denounced the new law as did groups like Amnesty International. Unsurprisingly, this had little effect and whatever effect it had was probably counter-productive: Africans, understandably, are as hostile to cultural colonialism today as they were to political colonialism in the past. They do not like Westerners telling them what to do and who can blame them?

Unfortunately, there are various reports that conservative Christian groups based in the U.S. were instrumental in proposing the law in the first place. As in Russia, the World Congress of Families, which is based in Illinois, has been telling Ugandan legislators that there is a "gay agenda," that gays try and recruit children to their lifestyle, that gays are trying to undermine Western civilization, and a bunch of other bunk. Having failed to win the culture war stateside, these evangelical culture warriors have taken their ammunition on the road, to places that never saw "Will & Grace."

In 2009, when an earlier law which prescribed the death penalty for certain gay activities was proposed, the Catholic Church boldly opposed it. An inter-denominational organization to which the Catholic Church in Uganda belongs has been more supportive of this law. I am not sure the reason for the change, but it is worse than regrettable.

To be clear, and to repeat: The challenge posed by these laws is to Catholic orthodoxy. Huh? Aren't Catholics supposed to believe that homosexual inclinations are disordered? Aren't we supposed to believe

that marriage is uniquely between one man and one woman for an entire lifetime? Aren't we supposed to see efforts by gays and lesbians to be accepted as equals as a threat to our religious liberty?

The starting point for all Catholic social and ethical teaching is the inviolable dignity of each and every human being. This dignity is rooted first in the Imago Dei, the belief revealed to God's people Israel, that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God. For Catholics, this dignity received further affirmation and scope by reason of our belief in the Incarnation, our belief that God Himself came down from heaven and took on human flesh for our salvation. This commitment to human dignity, and the breadth of its scope, is further strengthened by our Scriptural testimony, where, in St. Paul's Letter to the Colossians, we are instructed: "For in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominations or principalities or authorities" all things were created through him and for him." (Col 1:16) There is no footnote in that Letter to the Colossians that indicates "except the gays."

Obviously, sin obscures our human dignity but it does not, it cannot, defeat it. These dogmatic beliefs in the Imago Dei and the Incarnation and the relationship of Jesus Christ to the Creation of all that is, these are beliefs about God that lead us to our core belief about humankind: That ours is an inestimable and inalienable dignity. That is the ground from which all of our ethical teachings sprout. This belief in human dignity is why we Catholics oppose abortion. It is why we believe all people have a right to a living wage. It is why we oppose violence and favor diplomacy and negotiation. It is why we treasure the family where human life is protected and permitted to grow. It is why we oppose all forms of unjust discrimination. It is why we must, as the Master instructed us in the Gospel last Sunday, learn to love our enemies, to give our cloak as well, and to walk the second mile.

The bishops in Uganda must ask themselves: Did we walk that second mile? I am all for promoting the traditional family. But, the Holy Father issued a letter to families this morning in Rome, and he managed to avoid blaming gays for the challenges that afflict the family in today's culture. And these conservative evangelicals who roam the earth seeking the destruction of gays, are they not at least a little bit curious about how the modern economy is threatening the family? In *Quadragesimo anno*, Pope Pius XI wrote, "It is an intolerable abuse, and to be abolished at all cost, for mothers on account of the father's low wage to be forced to engage in gainful occupation outside the home to the neglect of their proper cares and duties, especially the training of children." That was 1931, so you can forgive Pius XI his understanding of women's aspirations, but if you are looking for something that has, in fact, harmed family life in this country, and you do not look at stagnant wages set against a rising cost of living, you are missing a far greater threat to family life than anything a gay couple wants to do at City Hall.

Gays are right to be alarmed by this new law in Uganda. I am not a fan of slippery slope arguments, but I recall seeing prisoners' clothes at Auschwitz with the pink triangle on the breast and shuddering to the very depths of my soul. It is a measure of a humane and Christian civilization that small minority groups have their human dignity protected. There is no straight line from Uganda to the death camps. There is no line at all, just as the situation in Arizona is not like that in Uganda. But, what unites them is this: The Christian Church must learn how to promote family life without attacking the human dignity of gay men and women. That is foundational. It is a sin to do otherwise. The gravity of that sin differs from culture to culture. I do not expect Africa to embrace Upper West Side values tomorrow or anytime. But, the Church must proclaim the dignity of each and every human person in all places and at all times if we are to be true to our most basic dogmatic beliefs.

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