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Anti-gay bill in Uganda challenges Catholics to take a stand

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All Things Catholic

As Spiderman has always understood, with great power comes great responsibility. In Catholicism, that's a point with particular relevance these days for Africa. Explosive growth of the church is turning Africa into a 21st century Catholic powerhouse, which means that Catholic leaders in Africa face a new responsibility to wield their influence wisely.

A startling story percolating in Uganda illustrates that truth.

An Anglophone nation located in eastern Africa, Uganda has a population of 32 million, roughly 40 percent Catholic. By mid-century the Catholic population should soar to 56 million, enough to make Uganda the sixth-largest Catholic nation in the world, ahead of such traditional Catholic powers as France, Italy, Spain and Poland.

As Comte said, demography is destiny, and Uganda's destiny is to be a force in setting the tone for the global church. Right now Ugandan Catholics face precisely one of those tone-setting choices: How to respond to a draconian new bill in parliament which would impose the death penalty for homosexuality in certain circumstances.

Homosexuality has long been illegal in Uganda, as in most African societies, reflecting traditional African morality and a strong cultural emphasis on the family. Today, however, there is an increasingly punitive mood on the continent, which many analysts regard as an equal-and-opposite reaction to the culture wars in the West: the more Europe and the States insist on gay rights, the more African societies push back. Many Africans regard homosexuality as a Western aberration, so anti-gay backlash is not simply a reflection of family values but also anti-colonial resentment.

In October, a Ugandan parliamentarian named David Bahati, a member of the ruling National Resistance Movement and an Evangelical Christian, introduced the "Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2009." In a nutshell, the measure would establish life in prison as the penalty for even a single instance of homosexual behavior (which the bill defines in graphic detail). It also creates a new category of "aggravated homosexuality" subject to the death penalty. Examples include:

- Homosexual relations with a minor or a disabled person;
- Cases where the "offender" (the person initiating the homosexual encounter) has HIV, uses drugs or intoxicants to procure sex, or wields authority over the "victim";
- Repeated homosexual acts.

Anyone who fails to report homosexuals to the police would face a prison term of three years. The bill also bars the "promotion" of homosexuality, in language that would essentially outlaw pro-gay support or advocacy groups.

At the moment, it's hard to assess the bill's chances. It has drawn indirect backing from Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, who also describes himself as a Christian Evangelical. Uganda's Minister of Ethics and Integrity has said he views the bill with "joy" because it will "provide leadership around the world," and a leader in parliament told a local newspaper it's "99 percent" certain the bill will become law. Other analysts, however, predict that Museveni will eventually find ways to stall, out of fear of losing international prestige and financial support. The International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute has condemned the proposal, and it will likely be discussed during a meeting of the Commonwealth of Nations, made up of former parts of the British empire (including Uganda), which opens today in Trinidad and Tobago.

Reaction from religious leaders has been mixed. Leaders from the Anglican, Pentecostal/Evangelical and Islamic traditions in Uganda testified during parliamentary hearings, broadly endorsing the spirit of the bill, though some objected to the death penalty provisions. International pressure is growing within the Anglican Communion to take a stand against the measure, which has already been denounced by the Anglican Church of Canada.

It's entirely possible, however, that such moves may backfire, stirring resistance to outside interference. One local Anglican prelate said this in the wake of the Canadian resolution: "Ugandan Parliament, the watch dog of our laws, please go ahead and put the anti-gay laws in place. It is then that we become truly accountable to our young and to this country, not to Canada or England. We are in charge!"

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To date, there's been little public comment from Uganda's Catholic leadership.

In some ways, the bishops are between a rock and a hard place. They may not like the harsher elements of the bill, but they also share the suspicion that Western forces are trying to cram a liberal social agenda down Africa's throat, and they don't want to discourage efforts to defend African values. (In truth, bishops across Africa feel this way, including many seen in the West as "liberal" on matters such as the environment, trading relationships and armed conflict. Assertion of a Western campaign to subvert Africa's family values loomed large during the recent Synod for Africa in Rome.)

As time goes on, Catholic silence will be increasingly unsustainable, especially if the bill comes up for a vote.

At least two aspects of the proposal seem like no-brainers for Catholic opposition: the death penalty, and the threat of sending people to jail for failing to report homosexuals to the police. If enforced, the latter measure could have devastating implications for pastoral ministry with homosexual persons. A few leading Evangelical Christians in the States, including some who believe in "curing" homosexuality, have already expressed opposition on that basis.

More broadly, criminalizing homosexuality to such an extent runs the risk of driving it further underground, with especially worrying consequences for the treatment of HIV/AIDS.

Dr. Edward Green, of Harvard's AIDS Prevention Research Project, has issued just such a warning. For the record, Green is hardly hostile to religious sensitivities on sexual morality. His research confirms the efficacy of abstinence in anti-AIDS efforts, and last March he defended Pope Benedict XVI when his criticism of condoms in Africa stoked a furor. Green recently said: "The bill sounds dangerous and completely inhumane. As a practical matter, such a bill is unenforceable and would only drive homosexuality underground, terrorize gay men and women and their loved ones, and justify witch hunts."

The approach to homosexuality in the Catechism of the Catholic Church is well-known, and amounts to an elaboration of Augustine's famous formula "love the sinner, hate the sin." The Catechism unambiguously classifies homosexuality as "intrinsically disordered," but adds that homosexual persons "must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity," and that "every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided."

The question facing Ugandan Catholics is how to apply those principles to the debate sparked by Bahati's bill. One thing seems clear: Whatever stand they take has to be their own choice. Efforts from the West to force their hand are likely to be counter-productive, as the Anglican reaction illustrates.

Historically, Africa's bishops and other Catholic leaders haven't had a particularly high global profile. From time to time they might complain about international neglect, but they came to accept it as the way of the world. Today, however, demographic change has turned the Catholic church upside down, putting a global spotlight on Africa.

Now that they have the world's attention, the question is: What will Catholic leaders in Uganda have to say?

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