

Why Catholics aren't speaking up in Uganda about anti-gay bill

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 16, 2009 NCR Today

Two weeks ago, I wrote about a draft bill in Uganda's parliament which would decree the death penalty for homosexuality under some circumstances, and would also establish prison terms for anyone who fails to report homosexuals to the authorities. Those provisions have drawn wide international criticism, even from fairly conservative Christian leaders who clearly sympathize with the aim of promoting faithful heterosexual marriage, such as Rick Warren and several signers of the recent "Manhattan Declaration."

The latest development is that in mid-December, the Interreligious Council of Uganda, the country's major inter-faith body — one which includes the Catholic Church — came out in support of the bill.

Meeting in Entebbe, the body of more than 200 religious leaders, reflecting the country's main Christian and Muslim groups, called upon the Ugandan parliament to resist foreign pressure to abandon the legislation.

"Those countries should respect our spiritual values. They shouldn't interfere," said Joshua Kitakule, Secretary General of the Interreligious Council of Uganda. "All senior religious leaders have been given copies of the bill to read and educate people in the churches and mosques."

Uganda is 40 percent Catholic, and the sentiments expressed in the Interreligious Council statement would appear to have some grassroots Catholic support. I recently contacted Deo Rubumba Nkunzingoma, a well-known Catholic attorney who chairs the Uganda Law Society's Legislation Committee, as well as the Catholic Association of Professionals of Uganda.

Nkunzingoma told me that the bill "is being received very well, with a lot of support from the cross section of people I have talked to." Homosexuality, he said, "is largely considered an abnormality in our setting."

From the outside, the lack of any critical Catholic reaction to the most punitive elements of the bill can seem almost inexplicable. At least the death penalty provision, and the prospect of criminalizing even routine pastoral contact with homosexuals, would seem like no-brainers for Catholic protest.

The Vatican has even offered a bit of "cover" for Catholics in Uganda to speak up.

On Dec. 10, a Vatican diplomat addressed a United Nations panel on anti-gay violence, saying that "the Holy See continues to oppose all grave violations of human rights against homosexual persons, such as the use of the death penalty — [and] discriminatory penal legislation." Though there was no direct reference to Uganda, the context seemed clear enough, especially since the Ugandan legislation was a major focus of the panel's deliberations.

Why the reticence of Ugandan Catholic leaders?

Though by no means a complete answer, one point seems especially relevant: It's impossible to understand how many Ugandans approach this debate without appreciating the depth of their resentment of outside

interference ? a legacy, obviously, of their colonial experience.

In many parts of Africa, it's taken for granted that ?gay rights? are part of a Western offensive ? with the tip of the spear being NGOs and human rights activists ? to compel Africans to abandon their traditional moral standards in favor of a socially liberal agenda. As a result, the bill now before the Ugandan parliament has to be understood not simply (or perhaps not even primarily) as an expression of anti-gay sentiment, but rather as a rejection of Western dominance.

Nkunzingoma struck precisely this point: ?Needless to mention,? he told me, ?there are fears, or, perhaps it's better to say, suspicions that the whole homosexuality debate is being more engineered by foreign human rights activists than by locals.?

Coupled with that is a perception that Westerners spend a disproportionate amount of time critiquing Africa's treatment of homosexuals, and not enough engaging what many Africans regard as more burning challenges. Again, Nkunzingoma makes the case: ?We have more pressing issues to tackle, such as development, the environment, population and poverty, [rather] than the issue of homosexuals, who are a very small fraction in our society,? he said.

The unspoken point seems to be this: We'll listen to the West on gay rights when you listen to us on these other matters of justice, which affect a much larger swath of our people.

All this poses an acute dilemma for Catholics elsewhere who might want to embolden the Ugandans to speak out: The more outsiders try to influence the debate, the less likely many Ugandans may be, including the country's bishops, to be seen as carrying water for the West.

In recent days, I've spoken on background to Catholic leaders in the States and elsewhere who are wrestling with precisely this problem. My hunch is that the Vatican and national bishops' conferences around the world would be eager to lend their support should the Ugandan bishops say something, but they also realize that any effort to compel a statement could easily backfire.

Africa's Catholic leaders have an opportunity to carve out a distinctive approach to what the West knows as the ?culture wars,? one that blends traditional positions on sexual ethics with a holistic embrace of the church's broader social justice concerns. That may indeed require bucking conventional wisdom in the West ? but it may also require challenging some social conventions at home, too.

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