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Gay group director responds to cardinal's criticisms

by NCR Staff



Francis DeBernardo

Francis DeBernardo, executive director of New Ways Ministry, responding to sharp criticisms regarding his organization's ministries, said the group will continue its bridge-building work between lesbian/gay Catholics and the Catholic church.

His statement came after Chicago Cardinal Francis George unexpectedly issued a statement Feb. 5 questioning the organization's Catholic identity.

DeBernardo said George's remark "will not impede or slow us in our efforts to work for justice for lesbian/gay people in the church and society."

The Maryland-based organization defines itself as "a gay-positive ministry of advocacy and justice for lesbian and gay Catholics." It says it works for "reconciliation within the larger Christian and civil communities."

"We are astonished that Cardinal George released such a statement, since New Ways Ministry has never been contacted by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to discuss the nature of our work. We were not even extended the basic courtesy of being informed of the statement as it was being released

to the press. Instead, we learned about it only by reading a press account.

When dealing with such a sensitive topic as homosexuality, it is not surprising that questions will arise from individual church leaders. Yet, for more than three decades, New Ways Ministry has had its programs reviewed by scores of Catholic bishops, theologians, and pastoral leaders, and we have always been found to be firmly in line with authentic Catholic teaching.

If the USCCB had concerns about our ministry, why didn't they contact us before a judgment was made? Why was New Ways Ministry not given an opportunity to explain our positions?

For almost 33 years New Ways Ministry has been sustained spiritually by the prayers of millions of Catholics, and we owe it to these supporters to continue the work to which God has called us.

In the unexpected statement, George, who is the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, denounced New Ways for its criticism of Catholic efforts to defend marriage as the union of one man and one woman and said it does not offer "an authentic interpretation of Catholic teaching."

George said that since the founding of New Ways Ministry in 1977, "serious questions" have been raised about the group's adherence to church teaching on homosexuality.

"No one should be misled by the claim that New Ways Ministry provides an authentic interpretation of Catholic teaching and an authentic Catholic pastoral practice," George said. "Like other groups that claim to be Catholic but deny central aspects of church teaching, New Ways Ministry has no approval or recognition from the Catholic Church and ... cannot speak on behalf of the Catholic faithful in the United States," he added.

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The George remarks might be related to a program New Ways Ministry plans for the Chicago area March 12-14, 2010. The program describes its purpose as following:

-How can Catholic communities respond compassionately and faithfully to the gifts, needs, and life experiences of lesbian/gay people and their families?

-What skills, knowledge, and talents are needed to address lesbian/gay issues in Catholic environments?

-What role can pastoral leaders play in building bridges between faith communities and those who feel alienated and ostracized because of sexual orientation issues?

This weekend of prayer, presentations, dialogue, and planning is designed to assist those seeking ways to include lesbian/gay people and issues in their home parishes, schools, or other ministerial settings.

The New Ways Ministry web site says that staff members DeBernardo and Matthew Myers "will facilitate prayer, presentations, and dialogue throughout the weekend."

New Ways Ministry was co-founded in 1977 by then Notre Dame (now Loretto) Sister Jeannine Gramick and Salvatorian Father Robert Nugent, who were ordered by the Vatican in 1999 to stop their ministry

because ?ambiguities and errors? in their approach caused confusion for the Catholic people and harmed the church community.

After they continued to speak and write about homosexuality, the two were directed in 2000 not to speak publicly or write about the topic or about the Vatican actions. Nugent accepted the discipline and is in parish ministry. Gramick continues her ministry to gays and lesbians.

Because she defied the Vatican ban and faced expulsion by the School Sisters of Notre Dame, she left the order and joined the Sisters of Loretto in 2001. She made her final vows with her new order in June 2004, and her activities are still associated with New Ways Ministry.

[Catholic News Service contributed to this story.]

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