

DeBernardo: 'persistent, gracious, thoughtful, questioning'

Tom Roberts | Feb. 7, 2010

Commentary

I've known Francis DeBernardo for a number of years, have read a good deal of what he's written. I've spoken to him at length and I have attended a conference or two conducted by New Ways Ministry. He's persistent, gracious, thoughtful, and he raises questions that we all need to ponder.

Those involved with leading the ministry, I daresay, have a much deeper appreciation of Catholicism and its traditions than most who take up with one or another Catholic organizations.

I am convinced that DeBarnardo, New Ways ministry, and all the Catholic parents of gay and lesbian children and all of their relatives who love them and experience them as whole and wonderful human beings are not going to go away.

So I find it deeply saddening that the Cardinal Archbishop of Chicago found it necessary for some reason to declare that the ministry was not authentically Catholic and that it "cannot speak on behalf of the Catholic faithful in the United States."

Perhaps he was doing what cardinals now are expected to do "draw these severe lines between us and them, return to the church's old habit of defining so that we can exclude, making certain that everyone knows who's in and who's out.

I've only met Cardinal Francis George a few times, only had one substantive off-the-record conversation with him. He didn't strike me as the kind of person who would particularly relish making such declarations. But he's president of an organization of bishops and, Lord knows, it's got its own rather vocal and intimidating political base. And that base, if Notre Dame's invitation to Obama was any indication, can rally its troops to create a fair amount of hell for any Catholic institution that doesn't conform to its notion of orthodox purity.

I am not suggesting that George did this purely for political reasons, nor am I suggesting that church leaders should ignore the letter of the law. But it can't hurt, by way of warding off protesters, to stand in the church square and yell the talking points at the top of one's lungs. We get it. New Ways Ministry is outside the lines.

Now what?

I suppose that those Catholic parents and relatives and their offspring and friends, if they have the stomach and fortitude to continue to try to find a home within the institution, will also continue to find a certain solace as well as the company of friends within New Ways Ministry.

They likely will find comfort among gays and lesbians, as well as heterosexuals sympathetic to their struggles, who believe that no one among us yet knows the mind of God "let alone the deep mysteries of human sexuality" so well that we can declare without question that God has relegated an entire segment of creation to a

disordered status requiring that its members refrain forever from sexually intimate relationships.

In all of my associations with DeBernardo, I have never once heard him or the organization he leads claim for a second to speak for Catholic faithful in the United States or anywhere else. At best, they might claim to raise serious questions for Catholics everywhere.

I wish the cardinal had taken the time to have a meeting with DeBernardo. It certainly would not have changed church teaching on the spot, but perhaps he would have said that he appreciates the questions DeBernardo is asking, the experience he brings to the discussion, even if he can't agree with him.

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