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Cardinal: ministry to gays inauthentic teaching

Nancy Frazier O'Brien Catholic News Service | Feb. 8, 2010

WASHINGTON -- The president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has denounced a Maryland-based organization 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."

Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago 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," Cardinal George said in a Feb. 5 statement.

"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.

New Ways Ministry, based in Mount Rainier, Md., describes itself as a "gay-positive ministry of advocacy and justice for lesbian and gay Catholics and reconciliation within the larger Christian and civil communities."

Francis DeBernardo, executive director of New Ways Ministry, said in a statement posted on his organization's Web site that the cardinal's words "will not impede or slow us in our efforts to work for justice for lesbian/gay people in the church and society."

Although he made no reference to the issue of same-sex marriage, DeBernardo said "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."

In March 2009 DeBernardo testified before a Maryland House of Delegates committee against a proposed constitutional amendment that would have limited marriage to a man and woman and in favor of the Religious Freedom & Civil Marriage Protection Act, which would have given same-sex couples the right to marry.

"It would be a grave error in judgment -- both politically and morally -- for government leaders to assume that the Catholic hierarchy reflects the belief of most Catholic people," DeBernardo testified. "I ask that you follow the will of hundreds of thousands of Catholic Marylanders, not the few leaders at the head of the church, and protect the human dignity and civil rights of same-sex couples."

DeBernardo said he was "astonished that Cardinal George released such a statement" without contacting New Ways or informing the organization that it was being released to the press.

Cardinal George said that as far back as 1984, then-Archbishop James A. Hickey of Washington "denied New Ways Ministry any official authorization or approval of its activities," citing "the organization's lack of adherence to church teaching on the morality of homosexual acts."

"This was the central issue in the subsequent investigation and censure of the co-founders of New Ways Ministry," Cardinal George added. "This continues to be the crucial defect in the approach of New Ways Ministry, which has not changed its position" since then.

New Ways Ministry was co-founded in 1977 by Sister Jeanine Gramick and Salvatorian Father Robert Nugent, who were ordered by the Vatican in 1999 to stop their ministry to homosexuals because "ambiguities and errors" in their approach caused confusion for Catholics and harmed the church community.

After they continued to speak and write about homosexuality, the two were directed by their religious superiors in 2000 not to speak publicly or write about the topic or about the Vatican actions. Father Nugent accepted the discipline and is in parish ministry, but Sister Gramick refused and continues on the lecture circuit.

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 is currently co-director of the National Coalition of American Nuns.

In his statement, DeBernardo urged New Ways supporters "not to give up hope in the Catholic Church, but to continue to pray and work for the day when lesbian/gay people are welcomed as full and equal members in our beloved church."

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