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On sexual orientation, it's time for the church to join the bandwagon

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman | Oct. 14, 2010

This past month, I read with a heavy heart about the multiple reports of gay teenagers who took their own lives as a result of bullying. Their names include Cody Barker, Billy Lucas, Seth Walsh, Tyler Clementi, and Asher Brown. These kids are from New Jersey, Texas, Indiana, and California. They were in high school and college.

Somehow, as a society we are failing.

Some people say that bullying happens to everyone. I would say that there is a difference between getting picked on because you got some new glasses or braces and being bullied because of a marker of your human identity.

Many people are beginning to speak out on this issue and the need for more comprehensive education in our schools, from Phoenix Suns point guard Steve Nash to Arizona Cardinals safety Kerry Rhodes, and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to CNN host Larry King.

Who is missing from this list? I have not heard any prominent Catholic Church clergy speak out on this catastrophe.

It is time for church leaders to stop waiting for the bandwagon to pull on past and to take a stand to lead the charge.

Who really wants to be known for affirming a woman?s right to vote after 1919, or for promoting the Civil Rights Act after 1964? Do we want our church to pull another Galileo and get it right some 500 years later?

The church has a mission to be prophetic, to listen to the social and natural science experts around us and it is time to start living out that vision that Jesus taught us.

Instead, it seems that the Church is going backwards.

Last month a group of students and even some clergy at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John?s University in Minnesota attended the weekly Mass wearing rainbow-colored bands to stand in solidarity with those in the gay and lesbian community who are being bullied across the country.

They did not raise a ruckus. They did not shout out during the homily.

Regardless, they were refused the Eucharist by Archbishop John Nienstedt of the Minneapolis/St. Paul archdiocese.

The Minneapolis *StarTribune* reported [1] that Dennis McGrath, the spokesman for the archdiocese, said people wearing a rainbow sash are not allowed to receive the Eucharist because they are making a political statement.

However, in denying these Catholic faithful the Eucharist, the church is ironically making a political statement.

It is a case where a church leader took a stance and it doesn?t seem to agree with Jesus? teachings on justice and love for neighbor.

There is plenty of scriptural basis for treating our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters with dignity and respect.

Jesus commands us to live in right relationship with one another in John 15:12-13, 17:

> ?This is my commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends ... This I command you, that you love one another.?

Thanks to this recent op-ed in the *Washington Post* [2], we learn about the spiritual side of ?coming out? from Francis DeBernardo, Marianne Duddy-Burke, Casey Lopata, and Nicole Sotelo.

They crack open another story from the Gospel of John when Lazarus is called out of the tomb by Jesus and begins to live a new life. This is a metaphor for gay and lesbian people who have just clarified their sexual orientation to the world. Rather than hiding in a closet, a gay or lesbian person is given new life.

Building on Kate Childs Graham?s column from last week [3], the church has a mandate to start providing ?a positive and prudent sexual education.?

There are many rich resources and materials out there. It?s not like the church would have to start from scratch in order to promote an educational atmosphere that affirms one?s dignity and respect.

Locally, I look to the Gay Straight Alliance for Safe Schools [4]. That organization envisions educational systems in which all students thrive regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression and they train dozens of student leaders around Wisconsin to build safer, stronger communities.

The church has a choice.

It can either choose to join the bandwagon that is calling for dignity and respect for our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, or it can continue the course of standing idly by while injustices and abuses are committed.

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