NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The Archbishop & the Candidate

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 18, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Quick quiz from the religio-political estuary: What do Belgian archbishop Andre-Joseph Leonard and Colorado Senate candidate Ken Buck have in common? Bingo. They both recently made remarks about homosexuality that strike most others as foolish or worse.

Archbishop Leonard made a remark about AIDS being a ?sort of immanent justice? for those who live a libertine lifestyle. [1] This harkened back to a debate that I thought had ended in the late 1980s, when some religious leaders claimed AIDS was God?s punishment against homosexuality. For Americans, of course, the experience of watching one?s favorite bartender or neighbor or movie star die too early and die such a horrible death moved most Americans to sympathy with AIDS sufferers not judgment.

Additionally, two figures in American public life were most responsible for this interpretation of the AIDS epidemic. First, Ronald Reagan?s Surgeon General Everett Koop, a darling of religious conservatives, insisted that the government get serious about the epidemic and he denounced those who tried to politicize the disease or use it for anti-gay bashing. Koop was conservative, but he was also a doctor, and he took his obligation to care for his patients, all of his patients, seriously. While Reagan?s second term became inundated with Iran-contra investigations, Koop was a singular bright light in the Reagan White House. Second, just before he died, Father Michael Peterson, founder and director of the St. Luke?s Institute, wrote to all the priests of the archdiocese of Washington and to all the bishops in America, to tell them that he was dying of AIDS. It was revealed that Washington?s Archbishop James Hickey was visiting Peterson in the hospital daily. Hundreds of fellow priests attended his funeral at which Hickey powerfully compared Father Peterson?s sufferings to those of Christ on the Cross. The ?Blame the gays? approach to AIDS was relegated to the lunatic fringe.

But, there is the archbishop, unwilling to take back his words or apologize for them. As NCR reported, his own press secretary advised him against using such language but he persisted. I remember it being said of Mother Teresa of Calcutta that she was ?stubborn for the Lord,? in her efforts on behalf of the poor. Not to put too fine a point on it, but the contrast between Archbishop Hickey in 1987 and Archbishop Leonard today, leads me to believe the latter is stubborn in his hatefulness. The Pope should demand that he issue an apology.

In Colorado, Candidate Buck said [2]that he thought homosexuality was a ?lifestyle choice,? and likening homosexuality to alcoholism in which there may be a genetic factor, ?but basically I think you have a choice.? Most gay people certainly do not think they ?have a choice? in selecting their orientation; they experience their sexual identity as a given, as something constitutional. Of course, all of us have a choice about whether or not to act on our sexuality, gay or straight. But, there is something demeaning about the ?lifestyle choice,? language, as if one?s sexuality is akin to a penchant for organic produce, or an affinity for a manner of dress. When a pastor asks me how he can state the Church?s teaching without appearing homophobic, I always say two things. First, re-read your statement and, in this instance, would you ever speak of a ?heterosexual lifestyle?? If not, find better words. Second, every time you have to say the word gay or homosexual, think of the person you are closest to who is gay, whom you really like or admire or who has done a great kindness to you, and you will not say anything hateful or bigoted if you are thinking of that person when you say it. This would be good advice

for Mr. Buck.

As we saw earlier this morning, the issue of homosexuality is still a contentious one in our Church and our culture. But, these statements by Archbishop Leonard and candidate Buck are beyond the pale and should be treated as such. People that think this way should be made to apologize for it or they should not be entrusted with authority, especially in the Church.

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