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

After Don't Ask; Don't Tell

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 20, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

The repeal of Don?t Ask; Don?t Tell is a singularly happy event. The nation has taken a step forward in the long slow march of justice. The intellectually corrupt concerns of Archbishop Timothy Broglio notwithstanding, the repeal of DADT is a triumph for truth as well, indeed, a spectacular vindication of the 8th Commandment: Thou Shalt Not Bear False Witness. DADT required gay men and women to bear false witness and its repeal should be seen as a victory for truth as well as justice.

Broglio?s comments about the way anonymity can be a positive thing, in which he compared the situation of homosexuals to that of people in Alcoholics Anonymous, shows that the archbishop is clueless about how the sexual abuse of minors by clergy went from a sin to a scandal. (This may seem like a distraction, but bear with me.) A culture of deceit and denial is morally corrosive from top to bottom and allowed individual sins to both become pervasive and covered-up. The military archdiocese, where priests are always on the move, should be especially attentive to the dangers posed to children but, alas, it is led by someone who seems not to understand how the cancer spread. And, Sen. John McCain?s worries about ?unit cohesion? should also take note of the effects of deceit and denial on the Catholic Church. The question before the military was never quite properly framed. The real choice was always this: Is unit cohesion affected more by the presence of an openly gay person or an openly lying person, and one lying on orders? No one should shed a tear for the demise of this policy that caused the average soldier to question the authority of the rules and so threaten unit cohesion at its core.

No one should underestimate the force of the defeat of DADT. I confess, even I was shocked, truly shocked, to find Sen. Richard Burr voting in favor of repeal. Burr represents the same North Carolina voters who were once represented by Sen. Jesse Helms. The final margin of victory, 65-31, is remarkable. To see how far the gay rights movement has come so quickly, recall that in 1977, a referendum in Dade County to permit discrimination against gays in hiring, led by Christian singer and orange salesperson Anita Bryant, garnered 69.3 percent of the vote.

A front page, above-the-fold story [1]in this morning?s Washington Post speculated about the future of other gay-related issues in the wake of this huge victory. And, if the bishops are serious about defeating proposals for gay marriage, they should look, and look carefully at the argument over DADT and frame their argument accordingly. On the other hand, gay rights activists also need to look at how the DADT debate unfolded and what it means for their cause.

The fundamental problem with the gay marriage debate to date is this: Both sides talk past each other and don?t realize it. The Catholic bishops focus on the ?marriage? in ?gay marriage? while gay rights groups focus on the ?gay.? When a gay person talks about marriage as a right, Catholic theologians do not know what to make of such language. Let me share an example. In 2004, I was working on a congressional campaign in Connecticut where gay marriage and civil unions were a source of lively debate. On behalf of our campaign, I attended a meeting of one of the groups advocating for gay marriage. The speaker, a lawyer, asked, ?What is marriage?? and then proceeded to answer her own question. ?Marriage is 642 distinct provisions of the federal legal code.? [I do not remember the exact number she cited.] I turned to the person next to me and said, ?That?s funny. All

this time I thought marriage was the old ball and chain.? I do not think it is wrong to ask if when gays talk about marriage and bishops talk about marriage, they are talking about the same thing.

It is important to bear this in mind as the debate over gay marriage continues. I think the Church really lost the debate about ?traditional marriage? when we acquiesced in liberalized divorce laws. In addressing the issue of gay marriage, the Catholic bishops are well advised to note the Church?s continued refusal to accept civil divorce. Our views of marriage are different from others? views, and we need not apologize to anyone for that. But, we must be very careful about insisting that our view, however true it is, is the only one operative in our culture. I have no problem in our society?s bestowal of a unique and privileged status on ?traditional marriage,? but the fact is the culture does not do that today and has not since the 1960s when no-fault divorce became widespread. If the bishops do not link their opposition to divorce with their opposition to gay marriage, they end up sounding like mere bigots.

One of the key dynamics in the DADT debate was when advocates of repeal shifted from making abstract arguments about inclusion and focused on the patriotic commitment of currently serving gays and lesbians, whose lives were turned upside-down by the law. Advocates of gay marriage should do two things. First, in states like Massachusetts that have had gay marriage for awhile now, has there been any real harm done to more traditional marriage? Have divorce rates spiked? Second, they should highlight actual couples who have been together forever and who got married in Massachusetts and how the stars did not fall out of the sky on the wedding day. Personalized arguments always work best in contemporary American culture.

The fact that the DREAM Act failed and DADT won demands that the USCCB re-think how they intend to affect the political debate in America, but that will be the subject of my morning post tomorrow.

Source URL (retrieved on *09/30/2014 - 05:51*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/after-dont-ask-dont-tell

Links:
[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/12/19/AR2010121903719.html?hpid=topnews