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Good News from Boston

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 13, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

I am not surprised that the Archdiocese of Boston has announced [1]a policy for its schools, saying that in admissions they do not "discriminate against or exclude any categories of students." The new statement of policy was the result of a controversy last year in which a local pastor banned the child of two lesbians from attending the parish school.

This is a perfect example of why the Church in Boston has turned around and is beginning to gain the confidence and earn the credibility of its people again. A good pastor made a bad decision. The archdiocese reached out to the family immediately to arrange for their child to attend a different Catholic school. The pastor was not thrown under the bus in any way. The archdiocese said there was no policy on the issue of permitting the children of same-sex parents in the Catholic schools and said it would devise one. This is what they came up with.

A different bishop might have seen this situation as an invitation to stoke the culture wars. All bishops are understandably upset at the secularization of the culture and their powerlessness to affect it, even to stanch the bleeding within their own flock. But, some bishops respond to this by developing an "I'll show them!" attitude, a Canute-like failure to grasp reality, or they cling to an inflated notion of the role of canon law and the authority it confers upon their office, or they retreat into their bishops' residences and are never heard from again.

In Boston, Cardinal Sean O'Malley is about as accessible as they come. Just check out his blog [2]and you will see all the many and varied pastoral events he attends every week. This night a Holy Hour in the North End, the next day a retreat with seminarians, the following day, lunch with the homeless at a shelter, and most Fridays, a visit to one of the penitentiaries or jails in the city. And, when a controversy develops, the Cardinal's instincts are to defuse the animosity the culture wars occasion, not to rush the barricades and pour gasoline on the flames. O'Malley is not afraid to make tough decisions and he is never shy about standing up for the Church or defending her teachings. During the fight over gay marriage in Massachusetts, he was crystal clear about the Church's teachings, but he always made clear that the Church also affirmed the inherent dignity and worth of every human being and that the fight about marriage was about the unique status of traditional marriage and not about anti-gay animus.

O'Malley's model of leadership is pastoral through and through and that is why the numbers at the seminary are up, and contributions to the archdiocesan appeal are up, and even the Boston Globe has taken a less hostile attitude towards the Church. He still has his critics, some on the left and some on the right, and I am sure that some will criticize this new statement of policy regarding school admissions. But, I think most Catholics are happy to have a bishop who is a pastor not a bully, more compassionate than confrontational, someone who shows by example and not only by fiat how Catholics are called to engage the culture.

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[1] http://news.bostonherald.com/news/regional/view/20110113boston_archdiocese_amends_school_admissions_policy/
[2] http://www.cardinalseansblog.org/