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Gay marriage, bishops and the crisis of leadership

NCR Editorial Staff | Jul. 5, 2011

The vote approving same-sex marriage in New York is the latest and most glaring confirmation of some gloomy news for the Catholic church in the United States, and it?s not that gays have achieved the right to marry.

Rather, affirmed in the recent vote is the disturbing reality that the Catholic hierarchy has lost most of its credibility with the wider culture on matters of sexuality and personal morality, just as it has lost its authority within the Catholic community on the same issues. There are reasons -- and they have little to do with secularism, relativism or lingering influences of the wild 1960s -- why people are no longer listening to the bishops.

While we don?t want to minimize the seriousness of the concern of some over a societal redefinition of marriage, there are reasons we think the bishops? hyperbolic reaction to laws such as that enacted in New York are not only wrong-headed but counterproductive.

First, even if bishops retained the stature they once had in the wider culture, it is evident in polls and politicians? votes that neither most of the Catholic world nor the wider culture buys the church?s teaching that homosexuals are disordered and are thus relegated to sexless lives in order to remain in the Christian community.

A recent Quinnipiac University poll of registered New York voters found that 70 percent of voters say protestations of the law from religious leaders made no difference in their decision to support or reject it. According to Maurice Carroll, director of the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute, ?On gay marriage, many of the people in the pews split with their bishops.?

That attitude does not spring so much from a stance of defiance, as some bishops would assert, but more from the experience of gays and lesbians themselves and their parents and siblings, extended family and friends who increasingly understand gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons as far more than the sum of their sexual orientation while also understanding that sexuality is at the core of a person?s identity.

To parents of a gay child, the idea that a group of men can claim to know the mind of God so perfectly that they can proclaim with unyielding certainty that God deems a significant portion of creation ?disordered? is absurd. The label is not only demeaning but to contemporary Christians has no resonance with the heart of the Gospel.

To be sure, legislative battles are messy affairs. In Albany, the state?s bishops were embarrassingly outmaneuvered by Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a divorced Catholic and parent; by the pro-gay-marriage lobby; and by both Democrats and Republicans. The bishops? lobbying apparatus is a fangless relic. It is not a formidable opponent to seasoned political operators and elected officials, and it lacks any real threat of reprisal, the currency of politics.

If the bishops actually want laws to reflect Catholic values, they need a new, more sophisticated and potent model of legislative engagement.

Second, even if the bishops had a persuasive case to make and the legislative tools at their disposal, their public conduct in recent years -- wholesale excommunications, railing at politicians, denial of honorary degrees and speaking platforms at Catholic institutions, using the Eucharist as a political bludgeon, refusing to entertain any questions or dissenting opinions, and engaging in open warfare with the community?s thinkers as well as those, especially women, who have loyally served the church -- has resulted in a kind of episcopal caricature, the common scolds of the religion world, the caustic party of ?no.?

As if on cue, after the vote Brooklyn Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio declared by fiat that his diocese is ?not to bestow or accept honors, nor to extend a platform of any kind to any state elected official, in all our parishes and churches for the foreseeable future.?

In their reaction to the vote, the Catholic bishops of New York wrote: ?While our culture seems to have lost a basic understanding of marriage, we Catholics must not. We must be models of what is good, holy and sacred about authentic sacramental marriage.?

The statement might raise legitimate alarms if, indeed, the state law signaled that the Catholic ideals and sacramental life were actually under attack. They aren?t. Nicholas Cafardi has some excellent advice for the bishops (see story [1]) regarding their ongoing battle over same-sex marriage: ?We need to give it up. This is not defeatism. This is simply following Jesus in the Gospels, who besides telling us not to act on our fears, also told us to render to Caesar what is Caesar?s and to God what is God?s. Civil marriage is Caesar?s. If Caesar wants to say that you can only get married on Tuesdays, wearing a blue suit and a red tie, that is Caesar?s call. The sacrament of matrimony is God?s. It is valid only when invoked between a baptized man and a baptized woman, in the presence of two witnesses and the spouses? proper ordinary or pastor or his delegate. Caesar has no say in this.?

The larger problem for the hierarchy, of course, is not persuading the secular culture of its point of view on sacramental marriage, but persuading its own adherents, and particularly young Catholics who now tend to drift off in scores before adulthood, that staying attached to the church is a compelling good, that the church is in fact relevant and will draw them closer to Christ and thus the freedom and fullness of a life of faith.

The bishops have little credibility in the wider culture and diminished authority within the church because in the case of sexual violence against young people by members of their clerical culture, they responded in ways that any reasonable and healthy segment of society would have considered disdainful.

Archbishop Timothy Dolan, he of the wide smile, ready handshake and outsized laugh, was to be the church?s antidote to the cool and distant manner of his predecessor, Cardinal Edward Egan, who was a public relations nightmare from the start. But a love for beer and a hot dog from the cart outside the cathedral will only get you so far.

Dolan?s rising star presumably carries with it a stamp of papal favor. The show ?60 Minutes,? in its own hyperbolic burst, dubbed him the ?American pope.? And senior *NCR* correspondent John Allen, who has conducted a book-length interview with Dolan, has written that in other circumstances the archbishop of New York ?could easily have been a U.S. senator or a corporate CEO.?

That may or may not be the case, but as senator or CEO, Dolan would be held to standards of accountability that no bishop will ever face. Politicians, we know, can be run out of office and business leaders are held, however imperfectly, to standards of performance and ethics. Some of them land in jail.

In reaction to the marriage vote, Dolan stretched to call up the specter of what remains of the Red menace. On his blog he wrote that in China and North Korea ?government presumes daily to ?redefine? rights, relationships,

values and natural law.? In those countries, he says, government dictates the size of families, who can live and die, and what defines marriage. ?Please, not here!? he begs. The comparison, of course, is absurd on its face, a kind of hysteria that demands that someone listen when so few are.

The vote in New York sends a strong message to Catholic leadership. The danger is not in the vote itself. The danger they face is far deeper -- a crisis of leadership and authority for which they have only themselves to blame.

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