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

LGBT Catholics hope for future papal dialogue after Benedict's resignation

Thomas C. Fox | Feb. 21, 2013
Benedict Resigns

In the wake of Pope Benedict's resignation announcement Feb. 11, gay and lesbian Catholics reacted with relief and cautious optimism for a pope willing to engage in dialogue.

With the departure of Benedict, DignityUSA, the nation's largest gay and lesbian Catholic organization, called for [1] an end to church statements that "inflict harm on already marginalized people" and depict gay people "as less than fully human."

In a collective statement [2], leaders of Equally Blessed, a coalition of Catholics that works for equality for gay people, called upon the cardinals to select a pontiff who will realize that "in promoting discrimination against LGBT people, the church inflicts pain on marginalized people, alienates the faithful and lends moral credibility to reactionary political movements across the globe."

The coalition, which includes Call to Action, DignityUSA, Fortunate Families, and New Ways Ministry, said the church now has the opportunity to turn away from Benedict's "oppressive policies toward lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Catholics, and their families and friends."

For at least the last five decades, Catholic pronouncements on gay Catholic issues have been at least ambivalent and even sometimes contradictory. They have included exhortations on pastoral care and inclusivity and at the same time admonitions against gay lifestyles and warnings to gay Catholic organizations.

This ambivalence has resulted from church torn between the pastoral nature of the Gospels and sexual code based on centuries-old understandings of natural law. Official Catholic sexual morality forbids all "unnatural" acts under penalty of grave sin. It also rests in teachings that sexual acts are to be open to biological procreation. By extension, church prelates have fought hard politically against gay rights and gay marriage.

Sometimes Catholic ambivalence in extending a hand to gay people appears within the same document. Pope John Paul II in a 1981 statement [3] on the family called for "an even more generous, intelligent and prudent pastoral commitment" by families that find themselves "faced by situations which are objectively difficult."

The U.S. bishops in a 2006 document, "Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care [4]," wrote there is a need to "help persons with a homosexual inclination understand church teaching."

"At the same time," the bishops went on, "it is important that Church ministers listen to [their] experiences, needs, and hopes."

To be sure, no official Catholic pronouncement has ever argued for the church's acceptance of homosexual expressions. Yet there have been distinct differences in the way theologians, pastors and educators approach the

issue of homosexuality, often calling for more understanding and less judgment.

In the years that followed the Second Vatican Council, church documents on gay and lesbian Catholic issues exhibited more tolerance. Some theologians called for the church to abandon its focus on specific acts as the basis of Catholic morality and instead consider contexts, attitudes and the fidelity of relationships.

One pastoral watermark came in 1976, when the U.S. bishops wrote the document "To Live in Christ Jesus: A Pastoral Reflection on the Moral Life," which called for Christians to show "a special degree of pastoral understanding and care" for gay and lesbian Catholics. Importantly, the document distinguished between a homosexual orientation and same-sex behavior.

A few years later, Pope John Paul II, in Chicago in 1979, referred to that distinction [5] while praising the U.S. bishops for their refusal to "betray those people who, because of homosexuality, are confronted with difficult moral problems."

Church utterances have real consequences as they become translated into ministerial practices. Gay acceptance or rejection often varies from diocese to diocese and even parish to parish. Gay Catholic organizations respond by listing on their websites "gay friendly" parishes, communities in which they can feel accepted without prejudice.

Much of the current theological and social environment in which the church ministers -- or does not minister -- to gay Catholics was formed during the papacy of Pope John Paul II when Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, issued statements on homosexuality.

Repeatedly, Ratzinger placed doctrinal enforcement over pastoral considerations. In the process, he built the reputation of being "God's Rottweiler."

Gay Catholics widely view Pope Benedict as the chief architect of what they see as the official church's unwavering anti-gay teachings and attitudes.

Some examples, collected by *NCR* senior correspondent John Allen (*NCR*, July 30, 1999):

- In May 1984, Ratzinger ordered the imprimatur lifted from a book, "Sexual Morality," by Fr. Philip S. Keane, published in 1977, in which the priest argued that homosexual conduct cannot be understood as "absolutely immoral."
- In September 1986, Seattle Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen announced he had transferred final authority in five areas, including the pastoral care of homosexuals, to then Auxiliary Bishop Donald Wuerl in accord with Vatican instructions. The action followed a written critique by Ratzinger citing, among other flaws, Hunthausen's decision in 1983 to permit a Mass for DignityUSA in his cathedral.
- In October 1986, Ratzinger published a document titled "On The Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons [6] ," in which he warned of "deceitful propaganda" from pro-homosexual groups. "Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder," the document read.
- In October 1986, the head of the Jesuit order, citing instructions from Ratzinger, informed Jesuit Fr. John McNeill that he must either abandon pastoral ministry with homosexuals or be expelled from the order.
- In January 1987, following an investigation by Ratzinger's doctrinal congregation, The Catholic University of America fired Fr. Charles Curran, a moral theologian known for his dissent from official church teaching on sexual ethics. On homosexuality, Curran had written: "Homosexual acts in the context of a loving relationship that strives for permanency can in a certain sense be objectively morally acceptable."

- In July 1992, Ratzinger sent a letter to the U.S. bishops supporting legal discrimination against homosexuals in certain areas: adoption rights, the hiring of gays as teachers or coaches, and the prohibition of gays in the military. In such situations, Ratzinger wrote, "It is not unjust discrimination to take sexual orientation into account."
- On July 14, 1999, the doctrinal congregation forbid New Ways Ministry's co-founders, Sister of Loretto Jeannine Gramick and Fr. Robert Nugent, from continuing their pastoral work with lesbian and gay people.
- In July 1998, the Committee on Marriage and Family of the U.S. bishops' conference reissued a letter to parents of homosexuals, "Always Our Children." At Ratzinger's demand, the bishops added a footnote describing homosexuality as "objectively disordered" and deleted a passage that encouraged use of terms such as homosexual, gay and lesbian from the pulpit in order to "give people permission" to discuss homosexuality.

The church crackdown against theologians and others who advocate more pastoral paths or the reform in Catholic sexual teachings has continued during Benedict's pontificate. The most public incident came in April 2012, when the Vatican placed the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, an umbrella group for 85 percent of U.S. women religious, in a receivership under the authority of Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain. The action followed accusations by the doctrinal congregation that the women had not been faithful to some church teachings, among these a failure to uphold official teachings on homosexuality.

New Ways Ministry's executive director, Francis DeBernardo, said he is cautiously hopeful looking into the future. He said he hopes the next pope will be listener.

Gramick said she wants the papal war on gay people to end.

"The church," she said, "requires a future pope with a pastoral heart who is willing to listen and engage in dialogue."

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