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Can the church ever reconcile with gay unions?

Robert McClory | Jul. 6, 2013 NCR Today

The Supreme Court ruling that DOMA is unconstitutional and in violation of the Equal Protection clause will certainly stir wider efforts to legalize same-sex marriage throughout the country. The movement in this direction seems inevitable and unstoppable. I don?t think it?s inconceivable that 20 years from now same-sex marriages will be almost universally accepted in civil society. The heavy support of young people, including young Catholics, according to recent polls, indicates the direction we?re moving in.

But this inevitable thrust in the name of equal justice raises a confounding question: How is the Roman Catholic church in its official teaching ever going to come to terms with gay unions? To do so would require a monumental overhaul of the church?s deep-seated, traditional approach to sexuality and marriage. It?s perfectly clear that Archbishop Cordileone, Cardinal Dolan and other top leaders are in no mood to confront that problem. They are determined to reaffirm over and over what has been the Catholic position at least since the Council of Trent: that LGBT orientations including gay marriage, are unnatural and must be resisted, as Cordileone stated, by a strong campaign to ?catechize our people about marriage.?

The institutional church then has three choices: first, to stress without compromise the sinfulness of same sex unions and to keep goading civil governments to do everything possible to make or keep them illegal; or second, to get out of the politics of marriage altogether by separating Catholic sacramental marital unions from civil unions, thus ignoring secular society?s alleged plunge into moral depravity; or third, to undertake a massive reconsideration of Catholic moral theology, aiming toward a more realistic definition of marriage in keeping with modern developments in theology, Scripture studies, the findings of science and the best understanding of human nature and human relations.

I think the third option is the least likely to happen in the near future. But I would argue it is the only one that makes sense. Whether the church opts for choice one or choice two or perhaps a muddle of both, it will be isolating itself from the future. Unlike the issue of contraceptives, which, polls show, the vast majority of young married Catholics are using in the privacy of their own homes, gay unions are visible and public by their very nature. People in these unions have families and friends and acquaintances who have been and will be increasingly turned off by their church?s rejection of the choices these sons and daughters they know and love have made. The dropout data, I think, will be far more serious than that which followed Pope Paul VI?s condemnation of contraception.

And so the church of our grandchildren and great grandchildren may be a defensive, loyal, obedient church, almost a cult, the sort of small church Pope Benedict talked about in his repeated attacks on relativism and secularism. It would be a church entirely overseen by the contingent of extremely loyal bishops and priests priests inspired by Pope John Paul II.

On the other hand, the church of the future could be vastly different. Many Catholic theologians are convinced that our moral theology is so full of incongruities and inconsistencies founded on long outmoded assumptions that it no longer serves any useful purpose. I suggest the time is now for competent leadership to begin to chart out what needs to be done and undone and how, with the guidance of the Spirit, a radically inclusive form of

Catholicism might finally come to fruition.

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