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What Pope Francis really meant with 'Who am I to judge?'

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NCR Today

What Pope Francis really meant

There's been a lot of discussion in the secular media about what Pope Francis really meant when he said, "Who am I to judge?" Some (including Chicago Cardinal Francis George) insist the statement changes nothing; some believe the words mark an epochal opening up of the church's approach to gay issues; still others see the pope's words as a betrayal of official church teaching.

I tend to disagree with the most extreme positions, wherever they come from. But I firmly believe the pope's words were meant to change church practice regarding homosexuality in the priesthood and the acceptance of candidates for the priesthood who are gay. And that is no small thing.

Pope Benedict XVI several years ago signed a document declaring that bishops should not ordain anyone who had "deep-seated homosexual tendencies." Their orientation to the same sex, he said, must be considered a "disorder." I think for most bishops, Benedict's declaration became the law. Men aspiring to the priesthood either had to stay in the closet and deny their tendencies or discard their hopes of being ordained. It's hard to imagine someone approaching a seminary rector or a vocations director and acknowledging that he indeed has homosexual tendencies but that they are "shallowly seated," not deep-seated. Where can you go from there?

As he flew back from Brazil, Francis was responding to a question about the so-called gay lobby among clergy in the Vatican. He dismissed the lobby part, but then went on to say this about gay clergy: "If they love the Lord and have goodwill, who am I to judge them?" adding that gay priests "shouldn't be marginalized. A tendency to homosexuality isn't the problem. They are our brothers."

In other words, gays who are willing to take on the basic requirements of priesthood and are otherwise qualified should be welcomed into seminaries, ordained and treated as equal to their heterosexually oriented brothers. In view of the pope's statement, Benedict's ban has become outdated. I think it will be practically impossible in the future for a bishop to reject a candidate solely on the grounds that he has gay tendencies.

The more Pope Francis speaks, the more he sounds like John XXIII, and that is something to rejoice over. Since the end of the Second Vatican Council, I don't believe we've really had a Vatican II pope until Francis. His words about the poor, the laity and the need for listening with open hearts seem like they're coming straight out of Vatican II's documents themselves.

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