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Some spurn cautious take on Scouts' policy

Robert McClory | Sep. 9, 2013
Analysis

When the Boy Scouts of America announced in May that it would no longer bar gay youth from Scout membership, the National Catholic Committee on Scouting studied the decision and summed up the new Boy Scouts' new policy in three points.

First, a youth will not be prevented from receiving rank award or religious emblem simply for having or experiencing a same-sex attraction. Second, a youth will not need to hide that he has this attraction. Third, a youth should not be afraid that the Scouting community will expel him if he discloses his attraction.

In June, Charleston, S.C., Bishop Robert Guglielmone, the episcopal liaison to the national committee, sent a letter to every bishop in the country, adding some comments about the policy and cautiously concluding that the change "does not necessarily" contradict church teaching, "and therefore it seems that dioceses can work with this new policy as it currently stands."

Unlike congregations in the Southern Baptist Convention, which have bailed out of the Boy Scouts in record numbers, the 8,400 Catholic parishes that sponsor Cub Scout packs and Boy Scout troops around the U.S. for the most part have shown little or no reaction, perhaps because the National Catholic Committee on Scouting is forming a task force to aid diocesan committees in understanding the implications of the new policy before it goes into effect Jan. 1. But in some places there has been considerable negative reaction, ranging from suspicion and doubt to outrage and absolute refusal to continue parish sponsorship of any troop associated with the Boy Scouts of America. It remains to be seen whether the situations reported here represent a few isolated cases or whether the new Scout policy will face widespread objections and difficulties as it is implemented in Catholic parishes.

In Arlington, Va., Bishop Paul Loverde in a public statement in late May accused the Boy Scouts of America of wavering in its commitment to the values of the Scouting movement by changing its position regarding "those who openly profess to live a homosexual lifestyle." It is disappointing, he said, "to see the Boy Scouts of America succumb to external pressures and political causes at the cost of its moral integrity." Through a consultative process, Loverde said, "we will determine whether our parishes can continue their relationship with the Boy Scouts."

Far more extreme, even incendiary, were the views of Fr. Derek Lappe, pastor of Our Lady Star of the Sea Church in Bremerton, Wash. In a letter posted on the parish website in May, Lappe said he is pulling the parish troop out of the Boy Scouts of America.

"I do not feel it is possible for us to live out and to teach the authentic truth about human sexuality within the confines of the Boy Scouts' new policy." Aided by "a willing media," he said, there is an effort to convince the public that homosexuality is genetic, a legitimate civil rights issue. The "authentic truth," he explained, is that homosexuality is caused by "overprotective" and "needy and demanding" mothers and by "a lack of rough and

tumble play," a dislike of team sports, extreme shyness and a lack of hand/eye coordination.

"Our parish cannot be involved with a group that has decided to ratify or approve the self-identification of a 10-18 boy as 'gay' or 'homosexual,' " Lappe wrote.

Numerous media outlets and blogs in May also quoted the letter as saying, "In our marriage preparation we are going to try to get women to stop marrying such loser men who will never be capable of being good dads and husbands, and vice versa." However, the letter on the parish website, while still dated May 26, no longer contains that sentence.

The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* called Lappe's letter "the most hard-line anti-gay statement to come from anywhere in Washington's three Catholic dioceses over the last year." The Catholics United organization gathered a petition with 5,500 signatures urging Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain to condemn Lappe's decision. There was no immediate response from Sartain or the archdiocese.

Then in June, Lappe issued a statement noting that "some people thought the tone in my previous letter came across as sounding insensitive, harsh, or judgmental. I would be particularly troubled if anyone felt rejected." He expressed sorrow "if there was any ambiguity which allowed my words to be heard in that way." He then stated that though the church has found homosexuality to be "objectively disordered," gays and lesbians "must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity" and "unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided." He then explained that all homosexual persons are called to lives of chastity and quoted several supportive paragraphs from the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

In late June, the bishops of the three dioceses in Washington state issued a brief statement saying, "The recent change in the membership policy of the Boy Scouts of America does not affect the teachings of the Catholic Church or the manner in which the Catholic parishes in Washington State conduct the scouting programs under their sponsorship," nor do the bishops "anticipate any change in their approach to Scouting programs." There was no mention of Lappe's rant. Greg Magnoni, director of communications for the Seattle archdiocese, told *NCR* the bishops' statement speaks for itself, and he was unaware of any punitive action against Lappe by the archdiocese.

Meanwhile, at St. Odilo Parish in Berwyn, Ill., a Chicago suburb, the pastor, Fr. Anthony Brankin, wrote on the parish website in mid-June that the parish charter with the Boy Scouts of America will expire in December "and we will not renew it."

He said parents and children "will still have activities and programs and meetings here ? but they will not have to pay dues any more to some alien organization nor be burdened with non-Catholic and unhealthy attitudes that actually can hurt families."

In order to "placate their enemies, they [the Boy Scouts] have alienated their friends," he said, "and they have declared that avowed homosexuality is no longer a bar to membership. What this ultimately means is that Boy Scouts are teaching in our church that homosexuality is neither a personal problem nor a moral issue. And that we do not believe. ? Am I alone in thinking 10 and 11 year old boys should not have to worry about such things? ? In a certain sense, this is an abuse of these boys who should not have to deal with such issues. How unfair to some boy who himself may be in some latent stage of development" that "he is now made to feel he must declare his sexuality before all his peers and parents."

The Boy Scouts of America statement clearly indicated no boy should be pressured to reveal his orientation. Fr. Fred Tomzik, the Scout chaplain for the Chicago archdiocese, said he talked with Brankin and understood his reasoning, but could not change his mind. Tomzik added, "Every pastor has the right to sever relations with a non-Catholic organization if he wishes."

A spokeswoman for the archdiocese said that because copies of Guglielmone's letter had been sent to every pastor or parish administrator, she assumed that would be sufficient to indicate the archdiocese's official position. She was unaware of any action or criticism of Brankin by the archdiocese.

Robert Little, scoutmaster of the St. Odilo troop, said he was deeply disappointed. "There's been a Scout troop here for something like 70 years," he said. "It's an historical place; we've produced 67 Eagle Scouts in that time, and my son will be the 68th this year, so it hurts to leave." A nearby United Church of Christ congregation has accepted the troop; the transition will take place in September, Little said.

Also in June, Fr. Brian Grady, pastor of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish in Crystal Lake, Ill., informed the area council that his Cub Scout pack and Boy Scout troop are severing relations with the national group.

"The teachings of the Catholic Church are quite clear," he said in a letter, "regarding the open practice of homosexuality. This change in policy ? is clearly condoning of the practice of a particular way of life, which is detrimental to the spiritual well being of the individual. For a young boy to [be] placed in a situation where he has to share a tent or be exposed to other boys that are openly homosexual is not only unjust but immoral. As a former Boy Scout, I know how uncomfortable it would have been to have to be in close proximity with boys that would perhaps be looking at me as more than just a friend."

In his letter to the U.S. bishops, Guglielmone explained that the term "openly gay" can cause confusion because it is often used to refer to those who not only experience same-sex attraction "but also live it out in a way that promotes a corresponding lifestyle or view of sexual identity that is not consonant with the teachings of the Church." He stressed that the change in the Boy Scouts policy does not mean acceptance of a gay lifestyle, only that youth who acknowledge gay attraction may not be excluded or treated with disrespect.

Charlie Payseur, who, with his wife, Michelle, started the Crystal Lake troop five years ago, said he is "fuming," not only about the decision but about Grady's failure to inform the troop's founders before notifying the area council of his decision.

Sue Sabrowski of the Rockford, Ill., diocese's communication office, said she understood that Grady had talked with Bishop David Malloy and apologized for errors in his letter. She said that publicity about the incident "has created an environment that will likely make it impossible for the troop to remain" with the parish. The Rockford diocese released a statement agreeing with the new policy and explaining what "openly gay" means as understood by the Boy Scouts of America.

The diocese of La Crosse, Wis., published a statement in August, agreeing with Guglielmone's endorsement of the new policy, noting the conclusions of the National Catholic Committee on Scouting's policy change and even citing Pope Francis in saying that " 'same-sex attraction' alone does not preclude active membership in the Church." The statement was clearly in response to a report by a local television station that a Catholic church in Altoona, Wis., told its Scout troop to find a different meeting place.

In fact, the pastor of that church, St. Mary Parish, didn't quite expel the scouts. Fr. Derek Sakowski told NCR that he had problems with the term "sexual preference" and thought it was too vague. If it means the Scouts cannot ban "actively practicing homosexuals" from a troop, he said, he will have no choice but to end the parish's 20-year-old charter. Sakowski said he's contacted the National Catholic Committee for clarification and

awaits a response. It seems Sakowski could gain some clarity about his concerns by reading Guglielmone's letter to the U.S. bishops.

[Robert McClory, a longtime contributor to *NCR*, lives in Chicago.]

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