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Putin's Religious Right Arm

Ken Briggs | Feb. 13, 2014 NCR Today

The Winter Olympics has become a lively forum on homosexual rights, nearly eclipsing the games themselves, and Vladimir Putin's anti-same sex policies have been the focal point. LBGT participants and onlookers have risked arrest by opposing the law that demeans them and in so doing appear to have put the regime on the defensive.

None of Putin's venom would have been possible, however, without the aid and comfort of the Russian Orthodox Church. While the premier gets the attention, the church supplies the fuel for the crusade. Pussy Riot knew this, of course, when they choose to protest against the anti gay and lesbian initiative in an Orthodox church.

As the relatively silent partner, the Orthodox leadership has steered clear of becoming the target of human rights promoters while doing nothing to ease the tensions or demand an end to discrimination. Instead, they have adopted a clever strategy to appear sympathetic to a democratic solution while remaining confident that their hostility to homosexuality remains unchanged. Their proposal is to hold a referendum on the LBGT restrictions that they are confident of winning. It can give Putin an extra measure of political backing in his fight with his policy's foes.

The church's chief spokesman, Vsevolod Chaplin, appealed to the sentiments of a free society by declaring that the public alone "should decide criminal offenses." He then reiterated the church's position: "I'm convinced that such sexual contact should be completely excluded from the life of our society." If this moral lesson fails, he added, enforcement by law would be welcome.

The conflict at the Olympics could produce a far different consequence in the United States. Traces of antipathy toward Soviet communism has been carried over in various degress to Russia especially on the political and religious right. In their continuing criticism of Putin's Russia, the advantages of supporting homosexual rights as a means of weakening Putin's position could lead to further reconsideration of the issue themselves.

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