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Bishops' lack of uniformity on treatment of gays is refreshing

Pat Perriello | Feb. 21, 2014 NCR Today

David Gibson of Religion News Service examines the conflicting views of Catholic bishops [1] on the passage of severely punitive laws against gays and lesbians, particularly in Africa and Asia.

There appears to be a new willingness among members of the church hierarchy to openly disagree with one another. Nowhere does this seem more pronounced than on the issue of the treatment of gays. Viewpoints veer from unabashed support of criminalization of any kind of gay activity to references in the Catholic catechism calling for respect and acceptance of gay individuals in our midst.

Efforts are being made to pass or enforce laws criminalizing homosexual behavior in various countries in Africa as well as in India. Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama of Nigeria has been supportive, decrying any effort to make Nigeria and the continent "the dumping ground for the promotion of all immoral practices." Yet in India, Cardinal Oswald Gracias criticizes efforts by the high court to reinstate penalties of up to life in prison for gay sex. Gracias notes that the church does not want homosexuals treated as criminals and refers to Pope Francis' comment regarding gays: "Who am I to judge?"

Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin adds that those who fail to show love to those who are gay or lesbian are "insulting God" because God loves every one of them.

Two thoughts occur to me from this surprising cacophony of voices within the church hierarchy. One, how refreshing it is to see and hear once again a bit of ferment in the church. It is reminiscent of vital theological discussions that took place following the Second Vatican Council. This is how the spirit works best. This is how all of us grow and learn more about what God seeks to tell us.

Second, what will be or should be Francis' response to this sudden lack of monolithic uniformity among church leaders? I once had a seminary professor who used to say that maturity was the ability to bear uncertainty. I suspect that Pope Francis has the ability and temperament to brook a certain level of dissent and disagreement among church leaders. Perhaps the question needs to be how much dissent he will be willing to tolerate before he feels the need to intervene.

My suspicion is there will be no early clampdown on bishops for their differing and openly stated views. Francis has already made clear his position on the issue with his own comments and his actions in reaching out to all. He has included atheists, Jews, Muslims and gays in his embrace. I have no doubt he will continue to make his feelings known in daily homilies, more formal addresses, and in his written words. Bishops will likely take their cue from him on this as well as on other issues, and the church will gradually, over time, grow more and more into the church Francis is seeking to build.

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[1] http://ncronline.org/node/70521