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Obama's executive order on LGBT discrimination gets mixed Catholic reaction

Vinnie Rotondaro | Jul. 25, 2014

A mixed bag may be the best way to describe the Catholic reaction to President Barack Obama's July 21 executive order, which extends nondiscrimination protections to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender employees who work for federal contractors.

The order expands to LGBT workers the same antidiscrimination protections that have long applied to "race, color, religion, sex or national origin."

Though the order did not include a religious exception, it leaves intact a 2002 order signed by President George W. Bush that gave religious groups who contract with the government the right to consult their beliefs when hiring and firing. David Gibson of Religion News Service characterized the executive order as "a split-the-baby solution."

In a statement issued July 21, Fr. Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA, said he was "pleased" with the compromise.

"As has always been the case, Catholic Charities USA supports the rights of all to employment and abides by the hiring requirements of all federal contracts," he wrote.

"Specifically, we are pleased that the religious exemption in this executive order ensures that those positions within Catholic Charities USA that are entrusted with maintaining our Catholic identity are to be held exempt."

Similarly pleased was Stephen Schneck, director of the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies at The Catholic University of America.

"We all wanted to find a way to balance the rights of religious identity with the clear moral obligation to end discrimination based on orientation," he wrote in a statement.

Snyder and Schneck were among 14 religious leaders who had sent a letter to Obama earlier in the month asking him to include a religious exemption in the executive order that "would be comparable to what was included in the Senate version of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, which passed the Senate with a strong, bipartisan vote."

That legislation, however, has stalled in the House, and Obama cited the congressional gridlock as one reason for issuing the executive order. "I'm going to do what I can with the authority I have to act," he said. "The rest of you, of course, need to keep putting pressure on Congress."

The executive order "might not be perfect," Schneck said. "I'm sure some religious groups and some LGBT groups will be disappointed. I think, though, that this is something that religious groups can work with and there's no denying the important progress against LGBT discrimination that it represents."

Other Catholics were downright enthusiastic.

"As Catholics committed to full equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people, we applaud President Obama's decision to sign an executive order protecting LGBT workers from discrimination from their employers," read a statement from the Equally Blessed coalition.

"As Catholics, we know firsthand why these protections are so important. On a near weekly basis, a Catholic teacher, parish employee or hospital worker is fired because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. ... Equally Blessed will continue working and praying for the day when the Catholic hierarchy joins Catholics in the pews in celebrating our church's rich gender and sexual diversity."

By contrast, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops could fairly be said to have flipped out.

Writing on behalf of the conference, Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore and Bishop Richard Malone of Buffalo, N.Y., said, "Today's executive order is unprecedented and extreme and should be opposed."

Lori is chairman of the bishops' Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty, and Malone chairs the bishops' Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth.

"In the name of forbidding discrimination, this order implements discrimination," their July 21 statement read. "With the stroke of a pen, it lends the economic power of the federal government to a deeply flawed understanding of human sexuality, to which faithful Catholics and many other people of faith will not assent. As a result, the order will exclude federal contractors precisely on the basis of their religious beliefs."

In a statement released Wednesday, Catholic Relief Services said it was "concerned about the serious implications of the president's order for Catholic agencies now and in the future."

"As an agency of the USCCB, we will work with the bishops to promote a mutually acceptable solution," the statement said. "We remain hopeful that compassion and goodwill will rule and that our work on behalf of the poor around the world will not be unduly affected."

A spokesman for CRS declined further comment.

ACCU President Michael Galligan-Stierle said in an emailed statement that the organization "stands with both the president and the U.S. bishops -- each of whom has affirmed the principles of human dignity and diversity as key values of our nation and our faith."

"Where differences arise is in determining how to put those principles into practice, which can be complicated. Given that, ACCU is conferring with other faith-based organizations to determine the extent to which the executive order applies to our member colleges and universities. We remain hopeful that common ground between principle and practice may be found," the statement said.

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