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Baltimore pastor speaks his mind in homily on same-sex marriage

Arthur Jones | Oct. 29, 2012
Baltimore

In Baltimore's St. Vincent de Paul church, Fr. Richard T. Lawrence read a nuanced letter from Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori at all the weekend's Masses. It concluded: "Each one of us -- as Catholics and faithful citizens -- must show up on election day and do our part by voting against Question 6," the Civil Marriage Protection Act [1].

"The archbishop's thoughts on this question are powerful, and will be persuasive in conscience to many" and should be read and prayed over by all, said Lawrence, who has been St. Vincent's pastor for 39 years.

He then stated his own homiletic thoughts:

> I cannot tell you how any of this will come out, but I will tell you that I stand in genuine awe of all those parents, native-born, naturalized, documented and undocumented, who strive with every fiber of their being to ensure that their children have more opportunities than they had.
>
> And I will continue to stand in genuine awe of all those couples -- straight, gay and lesbian -- whose day-to-day, year-to-year, and decade-to-decade faithfulness to each other is to me a sacrament, a believable embodied sign, of the absolute faithfulness of God to us all.

Lori's letter to all parishes said the approaching election placed in the voters' hands "the momentous choice of whether to maintain marriage as the union of one man and one woman in Maryland, or to irrevocably dismantle our state's legal recognition of the most basic unit of our society -- the family unit of mother, father and child.

"Maryland has long provided to domestic partners many of the same protections married couples receive," the letter states. "These include medical decision-making and hospital visitation rights; exemption from inheritance and real estate tax laws, and government health benefits, to name just a few. Recognizing this fact, do not be fooled in thinking it is necessary to redefine marriage for all of society simply to provide other couples [with] benefits.

"Redefining marriage is not only unnecessary ... We cannot underestimate the long-term consequences that redefining marriage would have on children, on the family, and on the religious freedoms of individuals and institutions who continue to hold fast to our deeply held beliefs about marriage," the letter continues.

Lawrence then said in his homily that religious and civil law are separate and that "evil" civil law, like segregation, should be resisted in conscience while other civil laws, like taxes, can be complied with in conscience "even when we disagree with them."

"Even some marriage laws fall into this category," he said. "While the federal courts respect the rights of churches not to hire anyone for a ministerial position whose marriage does not comply with the laws of that church, we do hire and pay spousal benefits, such as medical insurance, for employees whose marriages are not valid in the eyes of church law.

"It seems to me, therefore," Lawrence continued, "that even if we do not believe that gay marriage ever could or should be allowed in the church, we could live with a provision that allows civil marriage of gay and lesbian couples. Personally, however, I would go farther than that."

Turning to decisions at Vatican II (1962-65), Lawrence said an eventual change in church teaching was possible, "and we could come to recognize the total, exclusive and permanent union of gay and lesbian couples as part of the sacrament of matrimony."

Lawrence cited Genesis 1:18, in which God said, "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him."

The church has always "been willing to marry couples in the church even though their ages suggest strongly that the procreation and education of children is no longer a possibility," Lawrence said.

"Could we not then say that their devotion to and support of each other ... could be recognized by the church as a valid sacrament of God's unrelenting faithfulness to us just as much as the union of an elderly straight couple?" he asked. "Neither will procreate children, but both can be sacraments of God's faithfulness in the living out of their commitment to each other."

Lawrence stressed such was not the teaching of the church, but said, "I personally believe that this is a possible line of future development in theology and perhaps eventually even in church teaching. And if this is even a possibility, could we not judge that civil marriage for gay and lesbian couples ought to be allowed by the state at this time?"

The pastor said if Question 6 passes, he will not perform gay or lesbian weddings at St. Vincent's or anywhere else, just as he did not officiate at the second wedding of his niece, whose first marriage was not annulled.

"I attended as a sign of my love and support for her, but I could not perform the ceremony," he said. "In the same way, I have attended, and will continue to attend, the weddings of gay and lesbian persons whom I love and support, but I cannot perform the ceremony.

"But could not civil law be allowed to progress where church law cannot go, at least not yet? Personally, I believe that it can and that it should," he said. "So there you have it: the official teaching of the church and my personal reflections."

The St. Vincent parishioners gave Lawrence a standing ovation.

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[1] http://mlis.state.md.us/2012rs/billfile/sb0241.htm