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Catholic church should support Boy Scouts' decision on sexual orientation

Fr. Peter Daly | Jul. 1, 2013 Parish Diary

The Scouts did the right thing.

On May 23, the Boy Scouts of America National Council voted to change the Scouts' membership policy. It removed the restriction on membership based on sexual orientation. In other words, they will now allow boys who are openly gay to be Scouts. Good.

That decision is consistent with the principles of Scouting. It is also consistent with the teaching of the Catholic church.

The BSA vote came after the most extensive study and discussion ever held for any rule change. It involved local councils, the National Council, sponsoring organizations (like our church), parents and Scouts. It also involved funding sources and legal advisers.

Scouting officials stressed that they were putting kids first.

"Boys are better off in scouting than out of it," they said at the press conference announcing their decision.

There was no change in the policy regarding the behavior of Scouts or Scout leaders. There is still an absolute prohibition on all sexual activity, whether hetero or homosexual. A Scout still must be "physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight." even if he is gay.

On June 3, the National Catholic Committee on Scouting supported the decision of the BSA. Edward Martin, the committee's national chairman, said the new policy to accept boys who are openly gay is "not in conflict with Catholic teaching." To be sure, Martin's statement was tepid support, but support nonetheless.

The Catholic Committee on Scouting followed Mormon and Methodist officials, who also said they would continue to support Scouting. Catholics are the third-largest religious sponsor of Scout troops after the Mormons and the Methodists.

In press accounts, Martin cited Section 2358 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church regarding the BSA policy. It says: "Individuals who disclose a homosexual inclination or a same-sex attraction are to be treated with the same dignity due all human beings created by God." Martin continued: "This teaching is followed in enrollment policies for Catholic schools, for Catholic sports programs, and for all programs of Catholic youth ministry."

In our parish, there will be no change. Our Scouting program will continue as before. I am glad. We have a wonderful Scout troop with about 80 boys. This year, we already have honored eight new Eagle Scouts. By the end of the year, we will have perhaps as many as 14 new Eagle Scouts.

If you come to one of their troop meetings on Sunday afternoons, you would think you had stepped into a

Norman Rockwell painting. The boys actually are what the Scout Law says: trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent. (Well, truth be told, maybe they are not always clean. But they are boys, after all.)

When our Boy Scouts meet in our parish hall, they carry in the American flag, recite the Pledge of Allegiance and say the Scout Oath. Then they go to work on their projects. They go camping, get merit badges, build fires, tie knots, make balsa wood cars, and horse around; exactly the same as Scouts did when I was a Scout a half-century ago.

Each spring we observe Scout Sunday. Our Boy Scouts, Cub Scouts and Tiger Scouts, process into Mass in their uniforms, together with all our Girl Scouts, Brownies and Daisies. The parents beam and snap pictures. The parish applauds. We are proud of them. They are just nice kids.

After the rule change, I sent our Scout leaders a letter saying there was no change in our relationship to Scouting and no change in the behavior we expected of Scouts. We still expected everyone to be chaste, boys and leaders.

But one important thing has changed: Boys can now be honest about themselves to others without fear of reprisal by the Scout leaders.

Let's face it: There have always been gay Scouts. Just like there have always been gay men in the military and in the priesthood. In fact, we have always had some gay bishops, whether they want to admit it or not.

What is different now for our boys is that they no longer have to be afraid. They do not have to be afraid of reprisals and bullying. They do not have to be afraid that if someone knows they are gay, they will be excluded or expelled.

This is consistent with Catholic church teaching. In 1986, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith [1]: "It is deplorable that homosexual persons have been and are the object of violent malice in speech or in action. Such treatment deserves condemnation from the Church's pastors wherever it occurs. ... The intrinsic dignity of every person must always be respected in word, in action and in law."

Growing up is hard enough without an added layer of fear and discrimination.

Gay boys are no different from any other boys. They are experiencing their maturation in fits and starts. They are discovering what it is to be a man. They are figuring out what it means to love. If the boy is a Catholic, he is also discovering what it is to be a follower of Jesus Christ. That is hard for us all, whether we are hetero or homosexual, but there is an added a layer of difficulty for gay adolescents. I've witnessed this in my own ministry.

Three times in my 27 years as a priest, I have had to sit across the room from young men who tried to commit suicide because they were gay. Three times, I have heard their anguish as they told me that their church regarded them as "intrinsically disordered" and their love as seriously immoral. Three times I have had to hear them say that part of the reason for their despair was our preaching.

Conservative Catholic theologians would no doubt demand that I condemn all homosexual acts as immoral. They would want pastors to insist that all gay boys must learn to carry their unique cross of perpetual life-long chastity, a burden we would never dream of imposing on heterosexuals. They would want me to say that all gay acts are evil and all inclinations are intrinsically disordered.

Well, let them say it. Let them say it to those boys who tried to commit suicide. Let them say it to the frightened

little Scout who is still figuring out himself.

It is easy to be some ivory-tower theologian writing in the abstract. They are not speaking as pastors or parents or Scout leaders. There is truth in lived experience, too, just as much as in theories. That is real "ontological" truth.

People who actually deal with gay youth know the Scouts did the right thing.

The Catholic church should support them.

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