

## **In Search Of The Gay Clerical Voice in Vatican Statements About Gays**

Some years ago, when I was a Jesuit -- and a superior -- I was attending one of our twice annual "superiors" meetings. There were thirty of us, representing some of the large (high school and college) communities in the Wisconsin province as well as the mixture of 3-6-10 people communities that I was from.

Midway through the weekend we were divided into smaller groups and asked to role play a situation that, to me, was very awkward: a group of scholastics (Jesuits in training) had gone out to a gay bar for some drinks. A dispute had arisen with others at the bar and some of the Jesuits had been arrested. The police had called you as their superior. How do you handle it -- with the police, the scholastics themselves, and the likely calls for comment from the media?

It was, for me, awkward because, one, it was the first superiors meeting I had attended; and, two, because it was the first time I had been in a public meeting with Jesuits where the reality of there being gay Jesuits was "out in the open," albeit obliquely, indirectly.

What puzzled me most was "Why are we doing this, is this really something to worry about as a superior, and, finally, who among us is gay -- and what difference does it make? That last question, really, was what lay underneath my discomfort because it was, at heart, the discussion that the role play was meant to lead into. Unfortunately, that discussion never happened.

I write this now because I am increasingly puzzled over the silence within the church, especially within the clerical culture, about the "rightness or wrongness" of being gay, being equal, able to identify, publicly, as gay, and, finally, gays now having the legal right to marry in 16 states and 16 countries, as reported by the Pew Research on Dec. 13, 2013.

Noteworthy on this issue is the current standoff in the Seattle diocese over the firing of Mark Zmuda at Eastside Catholic High School in Sammamish, WA --because he publicly announced his recent marriage. Hundreds of students, parents, others in the community (including Ed Murray, the mayor-elect of Seattle, who is also Catholic and gay) have demonstrated on behalf of Zmuda.

The president of the school and the head of the Board both resigned over the issue. 32,000 people have signed a petition protesting the church's action. Zmuda has recently filed a lawsuit against the school, saying they have reneged on their stated policy not to discriminate on the basis of race, religion, or gender. This is one of a half dozen of similar incidents that have occurred in recent years at Catholic schools across the country. They are likely to increase in future years as more states approve same sex marriage.

The issue has, recently, taken on international focus due to the current split among groups of African bishops about laws being passed to criminalize homosexuals. (David Gibson, Religion News Service, "In Rare Public Split, Catholic Bishops Differ Sharply on Anti-Gay Laws" Feb. 13, 2014). In Nigeria, Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama praised Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan for his "courageous and wise decision" in signing a harsh law that mandates a 10 year sentence for people supporting gay clubs and meetings -- and a 14 year sentence for entering into a gay marriage.

However, a few days later, a strongly worded editorial in the Southern Cross, a newspaper run jointly by the bishops of South Africa, Botswana, and Swaziland, took aim at the new law, calling on the Catholic church in Africa "to stand with the powerless" and "sound the alarm at the advance throughout Africa of draconian legislation aimed at criminalizing homosexuals. "

The editorial decried the "deep-seated sense of homophobia" in Africa and said the church had too often been "silent, in some cases even quietly complicit" in the face of the new anti-gay measures. Thomas Reese, S.J. is quoted in Gibson's article as stating that Church leaders who support anti-gay laws often come from countries with large Muslim populations that also tend to support measures against homosexuality: "I think they're afraid of the Muslim reaction, and I think they're afraid of the reaction of

many of their own people."

When psychologists, spiritual directors, and seminary heads are asked to estimate how many in the clergy are gay, the estimates range from 20 percent on up. For example, Donald Cozzens in his 2000 book "The Changing Face of Priesthood" quotes estimates of 23-58 percent of priests are gay -- with higher percentages for younger priests. Richard Sipe, a psychologist, says in his May 20, 2010 talk "The Pope Has A Sex Problem" that "Conservative estimates range from 30-50 percent." Those figures are considerably higher than the estimated number of gays in the general population. However, despite these estimates, one rarely hears mention of public disagreement by gay clergy when actions against gays are taken by dioceses, seminary officials, or the Vatican.

In 2005, after a ten year study by the Congregation of Catholic Education, a wonderfully titled document was released by the Vatican: "Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with Regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in View of the Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders." (Once the Document was released, the policy it recommended was given a much briefer -- and more familiar -- description: "Don't ask, don't tell.")

The document states that "The church, while profoundly respecting the person in question, cannot admit to the seminary or the priesthood those who practice homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies, or support the so-called 'gay culture'."

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(It should be noted that this document is an update from a 1961 Roman document entitled "Careful Selection and Training of Candidates for the States of Perfection and Holy Orders." This earlier document stated clearly that "Homosexuals should not be ordained." However, the enforcement of this probation was left to individual bishops and, in effect, was not carried out.)

I am of the firm belief that significant changes -- in attitudes, laws, and in society at large -- only occur when people are honest, about themselves, about their families, about their deepest hopes and fears. The impact of this personal honesty can be verified in recent public discussions regarding mental illness, abortion, being raped (as a child, a college student, or a member of the military) as well as having drug and alcohol addictions.

I myself have experienced how the tone and tenor of a discussion about change can occur when I say, "I recently attended the marriage of a nephew of mine who is gay" or, "There are several people in my family who have significant mental illness."

One can only imagine the impact if, at a meeting in a Vatican Congregation that was discussing the pending 2005 statement about seminarians, a theologian or cardinal had said, "I myself am gay -- and I am aware that this is also true for some of you on this committee. After much prayer, reflection, and discussion with others who are gay, I am convinced that this is the way that God loves me, and made me. In addition, I strongly disagree that my 'deeply rooted homosexual tendencies' are either disordered or immoral -- any more than those of you with 'deeply rooted heterosexual tendencies' are disordered or immoral."

It may, perhaps, be true that only through this type of personal honesty, by clerics who are courageous enough to risk censure, career advancement, etc., that a shift can begin in the stance taken by the Vatican in regard to what it means, in essence, to be gay -- and why, in fact, gay sex and gay marriage is neither immoral nor disordered for laity that do not have a vow of celibacy.

Pope Francis' most quoted statement from these first ten months of his papacy has been "Who am I to judge?" in regard to gay priests. But judge he does, both morally and theologically, when he upholds the church's stance on the "rightness or wrongness" of the 2005 Document that, in effect, tells seminarians "Don't ask, don't tell" -- not to mention the upholding by the Vatican of the intrinsic evil of gay sex and gay marriage.

The growing public consensus across the world is that gays are full and equal members of society,

worthy of all protections and benefits that accrue to those who are heterosexually orientated. And the day that individual and groups of clerics speak out on this topic is the day the Vatican statements and prohibitions may begin to weaken and, in time, change altogether.

In mentioning this, I do not wish to underestimate how difficult and delicate such "speaking out" might be, and the types of repercussions it may well result in. A statement made by a psychotherapist, Charles Martel, in response to an article by James Martin, S.J. about gay priests (America, 11-04-2007) emphasizes this point: "As long as church teaching remains that homosexuality is an 'objective disorder,' homosexual priests will find themselves experiencing a sense of defectiveness, or they will recognize that they can no longer defend something that they themselves do not believe to be the truth."

I can only imagine the anguish that Archbishop Rembert Weakland faced here in Milwaukee in 1994: to resist the demand for payment of \$400,000 by a former gay friend, or accept the public reaction to himself and his career that would occur if he stated "Yes, I am gay and, yes, I did have a close relationship with Paul Marcoux, a man who was a graduate student in his thirties when I first met him."

This type of public disclosure is very challenging to make, at any age, for any reason. But, still and all, as I say to Jesuit colleagues in their 60s and 70s, regarding their public support of another hot button issue: the ordination of women, "If not now -- when? At your 82nd -- or 95th -- birthday?"

Secrets rigidly held within institutions ultimately lead to the publication of books such as The Pentagon Papers by Daniel Ellsberg, and to Betty Metsger's recent text "The Burglary" that exposes the F.B.I.'s fifty year history of illegal surveillance of American citizens. The illegal exploits of N.S.A. have resulted in immense disclosures of data by whistleblower Edward Snowden. The decades long cover-up of the clergy sexual abuse by bishops has produced a website entitled "[bishopaccountability.org](http://bishopaccountability.org)" and a courageous witness such as Tom Doyle, O.P., a canon lawyer who has been defending victims of clergy sexual abuse in courts across the country for the past thirty years.

One might ask "Is Francis' papacy playing a part in this issue?" Thomas Reese thinks its a positive sign that the African bishops are facing criticism from within their own ranks -- a benefit of the more free-wheeling style that Francis has brought to the papacy: "This is progress. In the old days bishops wouldn't criticize each other. Now we have the bishops talking to each other and some are saying, 'No, this isn't the direction the church ought to go.'"

In conclusion, I remain puzzled and disheartened by what seems to be a massive disconnect between the reality of a high proportion of clerics who are gay and the public, demeaning, negative policies and actions regarding gays within the Catholic church. What kind of pressures and controls can help explain this resounding silence among the clergy on an issue that strikes so close to home -- and what will it take to overcome this stance in the future?

One can only surmise whether the positive statements made by bishops about gays in the Gibson article are, in fact, due to input by clerics who are gay. Whatever the case, it is a very hopeful sign for the church at large. Because once a bishop agrees that "God accepts and loves gays," it is a modest additional step to add "as they are." From there, all else is possible. Let the conversation continue.

By James Ewens