

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time July 10, 2016



Pastor's Column

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The Catholic Church, Pope Francis, Bishop Robert McElroy, and the LGBT Community

On his return flight from Armenia on June 26, 2016, Pope Francis said the Church must apologize to homosexual persons for having “marginalized” them.



National Catholic Register, June 26, 2016:

In a wide-ranging in-flight press conference on his way back from Armenia Sunday, Pope Francis responded to a question on recent comments made by German Cardinal Reinhard Marx, who said the Church must apologize to homosexual persons for having “marginalized” them.

Francis agreed that the Church ought to apologize in cases of discrimination against individuals struggling with same-sex attraction and referred to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which emphasizes the need to accompany and respect these persons.

“I repeat what the Catechism of the Catholic Church says: that they must not be discriminated against, that they must be respected and accompanied pastorally,” the Pope said June 26 on board his return flight from Armenia to Rome.

The problem is “a person has a condition,” he said, but, echoing his comment on the way back from Rio de Janeiro in 2013, noted that if the person “has goodwill and seeks God, who are we to judge?”

“We must accompany them well. ...This is what the Catechism says, a clear catechism.”

America—The National Catholic Review: “Digging Deep for Mercy We All Need”; Kevin Clarke, June 30, 2016:

The fallout continued this week following the pope’s suggestion that the church should apologize to gay and lesbian people during his flight home from Armenia on June 26. (In fairness, Pope Francis also said an apology was due from the church “to the poor, to exploited women, to children exploited for labor...for having blessed many weapons.”)



...The pope’s call for Christians to offer an apology to gay and lesbian people was also carefully welcomed this week by Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego. “I think it opens up a very helpful pathway to dialogue and hopefully healing,” he said.

Pope Francis, Bishop McElroy said, brings to this dialogue with LGBT Catholics who feel marginalized by or alienated from the church a “renewed and deepened focus on the questions of accompaniment and the mercy of God for all of us.”

“We all walk together in a life of virtue and discipleship,” Bishop McElroy said, “and all of us fail at times.”

He adds: “We have to begin to incorporate that mercy into the depths of our hearts and souls in ways that are going to be uncomfortable for us...We all need to be shown

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mercy; it is something that binds us together, not differentiates us."

"What we need to project in the life of the church is 'You are part of us and we are a part of you.' LGBT Catholics are part of our families."

That is not going to be an easy process, he acknowledged. It is one that will require preparation and "a lot of discussion and accompaniment and reflection in the church." Bishop McElroy emphasized that he does not mean that reflection and accompaniment should be limited to LGBT Catholics. He said all members of the Catholic community who will be struggling with the idea of apology, and welcoming gay and lesbian Catholics will similarly require accompaniment and reflection.

In the past, he argues, diocesan and parish leaders have struggled with two tendencies regarding LGBT people: "whether you had to sacrifice fidelity to the teaching of the church or sacrifice effective outreach to the LGBT community."

"My own view," the bishop said, "is that much of the destructive attitude of many Catholics to the gay and lesbian community is motivated by a failure to comprehend the totality of the church's teaching on homosexuality."

That teaching includes the conviction that "moral sexual activity only takes place within the context of marriage between a man and a woman." But "that's not a teaching which applies just to gay men," Bishop McElroy said. "It is teaching across the board and there is massive failure on that."

Bishop McElroy argues that all Christians are called to a life of virtue, in emulation of Christ. Chastity is among the virtues of life—others include self-sacrifice, service, and piety—and it is important one, "but it does not have the uniquely preeminent role in determining the character of a disciple of Christ nor one's relationship with the church" that some believe, according to Bishop McElroy.

Finally, and most poignantly in light of the recent attack in Orlando on a gay nightclub that claimed 49 lives, the totality of the church's teaching includes the understanding that all Christians are "called to build a society in which people are not victimized or violence visited upon them or unjustly discriminated against because of their sexual orientation."

The bishop noted "a human but destructive tendency to exclude and label people as the 'other,' but the accompaniment that Pope Francis teaches points away from that" in a manner that can help root out violence and

unjust discrimination against LGBT people. Bishop McElroy adds, "In fairness Pope John Paul II reiterated this many, many times."

The bishop appreciates the notion of an apology as an opportunity "to try to really create an understanding and a reality in the life of the church that members of the LGBT community are welcome, and genuinely so."

A practical step toward the apology by the pope, Bishop McElroy thought, might be a re-evaluation of the language the church uses in even talking about LGBT Catholics. "We are not talking about some group or person who is the 'other,'" he said. "It has to be language that is inclusive, embracing, it has to be pastoral."

While *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* on homosexuality and other teaching on pastoral care for LGBT Catholics deplores violence or unjust discrimination against people who are gay or lesbian, it also describes homosexual acts as "intrinsically disordered."

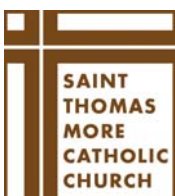
Bishop McElroy thinks that phrasing ought to be carefully reconsidered. "The word 'disordered' to most people is a psychological term," he explains. "In Catholic moral theology it is a philosophical term that is automatically misunderstood in our society as a psychological judgment." He thought the term evidence of "very destructive language that I think we should not use pastorally."

Another relatively easy step for most dioceses to take by way of institutional apology would be "to seek to collaborate with those in society who are working to banish discrimination and violence leveled against people because of their sexual orientation."

He added, "The church has already been doing that, but we have to step it up." Some church leaders may worry that the pope in his recent comments on outreach and apology to gay and lesbian Catholics may be moving too quickly, too far ahead of his flock. Bishop McElroy is not so sure, noting the many Catholic families he has met with have been longing to hear something positive about the church and its pastoral relationship with LGBT Catholics. "When I go out and meet with laypeople," he said, "so many of them have family members, brothers and sisters and sons and daughters, mothers and fathers who are gay or lesbian. For them it is a great and painful thing to feel excluded from the life of the church, and for that element...we are not moving fast enough."

As we move through this discussion, St. Thomas More Catholic Church continues to be a Church for all people, and we accept the challenge to accompany all people on their journey of faith!

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