

Finding a Way

Today in our society, homosexuality is out of the shadows, where it was simply not talked about, and is a significant societal issue that calls for moral reflection and dialogue.

On this topic, Catholics, like others in our society, span a continuum from being condoning and accepting, understanding and compassionate, to mean spirited and hateful.

This continuum exists as well when it comes to opinions about the Catholic Church's teaching on homosexuality.

Some criticize the Church for being harsh, insensitive, unfair and discriminatory to people of same sex orientation.

Others say the Church and its bishops are "too tolerant of gays."

I, too, encounter this broad range of thoughts and feelings.

I have met persons who fear the Church is marginalizing gay persons, driving them away from the Church and making them targets for contempt and even violence.

I have met others who call for a clear denunciation and repudiation by the Church of people of same sex orientation.

Several years ago, I talked about ministry to homosexual persons with our Presbyteral Council (a primary consultative body made up of priests who represent the different regions in our Diocese and key priest advisors). We discussed how we might reach out pastorally to Catholics in our parishes who are gay and to parents and family members who struggle with accepting and loving their sons and daughters who have disclosed their orientation.

The consensus of our discussion was this:

Ministry to homosexual persons is best accomplished at the parish through spiritual direction and the sacrament of Reconciliation.

At the parish, priests need to receive people of same sex orientation with compassion and should assist them pastorally in their efforts to live as disciples of Christ.

I thought then that this was a sound approach to ministry to those with same sex orientation. I still think that, but I also now believe we should be doing more.

Last November, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops published the document "Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care."

The document calls on diocesan bishops to develop a ministry to persons with a homosexual inclination. It calls pastoral leaders and diocesan bishops to exercise leadership and to provide support for such a ministry.

I met recently with a group of pastoral leaders and parishioners to reflect on this document and to formulate some ideas toward developing a ministry.

The discussion was lively, engaging and wide ranging.

I heard that in whatever ministry we ultimately may develop we must challenge any attitudes, language or actions in the Church and in society that demean people of same sex orientation.

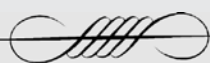
I heard that we need to be clear about the Church's moral teaching on homosexuality.

I heard that it is important that we articulate a positive vision of how a



+ Gerald Kicanas

"I am very sensitive to the concerns I have heard from people of same sex orientation that they feel they have no place in our parishes or in the household of faith. We need to consider how we as a Diocese or how I as bishop may be generating such misunderstanding."



"Soy muy sensible a las preocupaciones que he oído de personas de orientación homosexual que sienten que no hay lugar para ellos en nuestras parroquias o en la casa de la fe. Necesitamos considerar cómo la Diócesis, y yo, en calidad de obispo, podríamos estar generando este malentendido."



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person of same sex orientation can live in communion with the Church and remain faithful in living as a Catholic.

We reflected in our discussion on the struggle that parents face in accepting a son or daughter who disclose to them their same sex orientation. Concern was expressed that if these sons and daughters are not welcomed and appreciated by the Church they will turn to the secular culture for acceptance.

We talked about the importance of parents learning how they can relate to their children of same sex orientation in such a way that, in the words of the recent document, “the bonds of love among the family members remain intact.”

We also explored ways that Catholics of same sex orientation who want to live in communion with the Church can find the personal and spiritual support they need.

Some suggested that it would be helpful if there would be a parish where Catholics of same sex orientation could worship in an accepting environment that would help them in living faithfully as Catholics.

The group suggested that pastoral leaders in our parishes – priests, religious, deacons and laity – need catechesis and formation on how to respond pastorally to people of same sex orientation.

There was emphasis in our discussion on these three points: that pastoral leaders must listen carefully to the lived experiences of their people and try to relate the Church’s teaching to those experiences in a convincing way; that while there are some people of same sex orientation who want no part of the Church we need to continue to reach out to them and invite them to return home; and that we need to find ways to assist those with same sex orientation who want to remain in communion with the Church.

While no final recommendations on a ministry plan resulted from our discussion, it is clear to me that our ministry plan must uphold Catholic teaching while it helps us to welcome people of same sex orientation, to support them in living “authentic human integrity and holiness of life” and to encourage “their full and active participation” (“To Live in Christ Jesus: A Pastoral Reflection on the Moral Life,” U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1976).

Our plan also must challenge any degradation and violence toward homosexual persons in the spirit of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s 1986 statement, “On Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,” that states, “It is deplorable that homosexual persons have been the object of violent malice in speech or action. Such treatment deserves condemnation from the Church’s pastors, wherever it occurs.”

I am very sensitive to the concerns I have heard from people of same sex orientation that they feel they have no place in our parishes or in the household of faith. We need to consider how we as a Diocese or how I as bishop may be generating such misunderstanding.

I will continue to explore ways that our Diocese can make clear to our Catholic people the consistent teaching of the Church that “the Good News of Jesus Christ is for all people,” that each person is created by God out of love and is therefore deserving to be treated with respect and dignity and that there are no gradations within God’s family: all are His beloved daughters and son.

I welcome your comments and reflections.