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Editorial: The Catholic hierarchy's misguided priorities

By Bernadette J. Brooten

The Catholic hierarchy's teachings on sexual morality are profoundly misguided, and the problem reaches back centuries into the foundational texts of Catholic theology.

Just compare the hierarchy's vociferous opposition to same-sex love and marriage with its foot-dragging on preventing sexual abuse by clergy. According to the latest Vatican statement, "the Catholic lawmaker has a moral duty to express his opposition clearly and to vote against" same-sex union proposals, which would constitute a "legislation of evil" and "gravely unjust laws." In fact, adoption by same-sex couples "would actually mean doing violence to these children." In sharp contrast, never have we seen the Vatican enjoin Catholic legislators to include clergy as mandated reporters of child abuse, to promote child endangerment statutes, or to extend the statutes of limitations for civil suits concerning child sexual abuse. Actually, the Vatican seriously trimmed back the reforms voted on by U.S. Catholic bishops for preventing clerical sexual abuse.

In Massachusetts, the hierarchy's priorities became painfully clear when the state's bishops recently urged Catholics to oppose same-sex marriage even as the Boston archdiocese has still failed to settle the claims of numerous survivors of sexual abuse by its own priests. Massachusetts Attorney General Thomas Reilly, who has excoriated church leaders for an "institutional acceptance of abuse," has stated that if priests had been mandated reporters and if a child endangerment statute had existed earlier, church leaders could have been brought to justice. Reilly finds even the current church policies inadequate for preventing child sexual abuse by clergy.

To see the larger picture of this systemic problem, think back over the headlines of this past year. Vatican moves to bar celibate gay men from the priesthood. Catholic priest leaves the mother of his two children to die in bed of a drug overdose. Church lawyers claim that a six-year-old boy was contributorily negligent in his being sexually abused by a priest. Church board dismissed accusations of clergy sexual abuse by females. And now, once again, Vatican warns Roman Catholic politicians against enacting laws allowing for same-sex marriage.

How does all of this fit together? Is the church hierarchy simply being inconsistent? Unfortunately, these positions have an internal and deeply entrenched logic. For the hierarchy, same-sex sexual acts are contrary to nature, whereas rape is not - unless it is homosexual. St. Thomas Aquinas, whose thinking figures prominently in the latest Vatican statement against same-sex unions, said just that: abortion, contraception, sodomy, and masturbation are worse than rape and incest. Rape and incest, while sinful, were considered "natural" within Aquinas' thinking about natural law.

Seven centuries later, church leaders continue to base their moral theology on Aquinas's natural law template. Viewing same-sex unions through the lens of natural law theology, the hierarchy ranks these as an urgent moral priority. Within a natural law framework, preventing sexual violence per se is simply not the top moral priority. Similarly, church leaders see homosexuality as a principal cause of the clergy sexual abuse crisis, rather than clerical abuses of power. They disregard the sexual abuse of girls and women by priests or see them as lesser evils. (Since adult women lured into damaging sexual relationships with priests from whom they sought spiritual counseling have little chance of obtaining damages in civil suits, their stories have been missing from current media coverage, which creates the false impression that most clergy abuse is homosexual.)

If the Catholic hierarchy has lost credibility as a moral voice on sexual questions, many Catholic lay people are drawing on other religious values to set their priorities. Courageous survivors of sexual abuse, in recognition of their own human dignity, have sought justice. Frank Keating, former head of the national lay group appointed to monitor church progress on sexual abuse, repeatedly called attention to the hierarchy's failure to protect the vulnerable and the marginal. Catholic feminist theologians are challenging the model of marriage - with its deep roots in wifely subordination - that the hierarchy presents as the only moral one. The Voice of the Faithful is actively working for clerical accountability and to ensure that the most thoughtful Catholic voices are heard. The Catholic organization Dignity denounces the recent Vatican statement as "an absolute perversion of the Catholic social justice tradition."

The moral ground has shifted.

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