

# Letter's intent is misunderstood

By Bishop Matthew H. Clark

Just a few weeks ago, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith sent a letter to bishops, setting forth some principles to be considered when assessing particular pieces of legislation relative to the civil rights of homosexual persons.

That document, meant originally to be a private follow-up to a more public and official 1986 statement of the same congregation, bore the lengthy title "Some Considerations Concerning the Catholic Response to Legislative Proposals in the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons."

It was not intended, in any way, to be a mandate or directive, but was intended to present some principles and distinctions that could be helpful in evaluating specific legislative proposals.

As so often happens in this age, the document was leaked to the public and generated a considerable amount of negative reaction. I know that I have received a fair measure of it from homosexual persons and from their parents and others who love them. They tell me that they feel as though the document isolates them and rejects them, de-personalizes them and makes them enemies of community.

In addition to such response, I also have spoken with several pastors and pastoral ministers who were critical of the document for what they felt was its lack of a caring pastoral tone and its failure to demonstrate significant engagement with or awareness of the life



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experience and struggles of homosexual persons.

I can understand that criticism. Indeed, I think there is some truth in those observations. But at the same time, and in fairness, I also must say that the document was meant to be a background paper for use by the bishops and was not intended to substitute for their judgment in particular pastoral circumstances. Indeed, the more official, weightier document of 1986 recognized the complexity of these issues and supported the appropriateness of bishops making their own practical judgment at the local level.

I recognize and support fully the intent of the congregation to affirm and defend the church's teaching on marriage and family, to affirm and defend the church's teaching on the distinction between sexual orientation and behavior.

With them I want to deepen my understanding of homosexual persons and their experience, the better to be able to support them in their daily life and stand by them in those things that test their spirit.

Archbishop John Quinn of San Francisco expressed very well what is in my heart about this issue when he said in a recent homily: "My policy is to proclaim the truth respectfully, to extend the hand of friendship to those who disagree, and to open my heart to all men and women created in the divine image who are by that fact brothers and sisters to me. I will also be guided by the words of Pope John XXIII in his address opening the Second Vatican Council that the substance of the church's doctrine is one thing, but the way it is expressed is another. While faithfully holding the substance of the church's teaching, I hope to express it with kindness and in a spirit of encouragement, and not in a spirit of condemnation and coldness."

In pursuit of that goal, I propose to:

- 1). strive for the ideal expressed in the letter that the "dignity of each person ... always be respected in word, in action and in law."
- 2). consider individually each piece of legislation relevant to this subject.
- 3). hold conversations about these sensitive issues with Catholics who are homosexual so that we might deepen mutual understanding in order that when we disagree we might do so with respect, so that we can continue together on our common journey of faith.

Peace to all.

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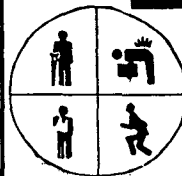
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