

COLUMNISTS

Bishops differ on same-sex unions

The state legislature in Vermont recently passed a civil-unions bill that provides various marriage benefits to gay and lesbian couples. The governor signed it into law, effective July 1.

Meant to respond to a Vermont Supreme Court ruling that same-sex couples deserve the same legal rights as heterosexual spouses, the bill stopped short of calling such unions marriages. On the contrary, it specified that marriage could only occur between a man and a woman. Nevertheless, the legal benefits it granted are virtually the same.

Same-sex couples may apply for a license and receive a certificate of civil union. Such unions carry all the benefits and responsibilities that spouses have in a marriage. If the same-sex couple should choose to separate, their union must be dissolved in a family court.

The new law affects child custody, inheritance, workers' compensation, family leave benefits, hospital visitations and immunity from being compelled to testify against one's partner.

The law provides a more limited set of benefits to blood relatives in yet another relationship which it calls reciprocal beneficiaries. This addresses situations in which, for example, widowed sisters live together and are effectively life partners,



essays in
theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

yet the state has heretofore recognized no special relationship between them.

Nearly 30 states have passed laws against gay marriage. Other states, including California and Hawaii, have domestic partnership systems much more limited in scope than Vermont's law.

Under the leadership of Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston, the 16 Catholic bishops of upper New England (Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine and Massachusetts) condemned the new law in language that was particularly sharp.

They accused the Vermont legislature of mounting an attack not only on the institution of marriage but on the "well-being of society itself." Predicting that the bill was a "stepping-stone" to the legalization of same-sex marriages, they suggested the need for an amendment to the

state's constitution to prevent such a course of action.

Many Catholics (and many non-Catholics) may assume that the 16 New England bishops could have taken no other stand. As bishops, they have a duty to proclaim official Catholic doctrine, regardless of its political unpopularity.

While the latter point is correct, it is not a matter of official Catholic doctrine that a state may grant no legal rights to couples in same-sex unions. What is official Catholic teaching is that homosexual behavior (as distinguished from a homosexual orientation) is immoral, and that a sacramental marriage can only be contracted by a man and a woman. How the state determines legal rights and benefits is a political, not moral, matter.

At almost the same time that Vermont passed its civil-unions bill, all Catholic bishops of New Zealand were expressing public support for a system of registration that would give homosexual couples the same legal rights as married couples, short of the right to marry.

The bishops began their statement with an insistence that marriage, defined by sexual differentiation, can apply only to heterosexual couples. Nevertheless, the bishops informed the government that they supported same-sex couples

claim to rights in such matters as income support, tax-credit entitlement, legal aid and the division of property.

Although New Zealand bishops opposed same-sex couples' adoption of children, they supported their right to parental leave when they are, in fact, involved as a couple in the care of a child.

For the New Zealand bishops, there is a clear distinction between the requirements of morality and of law. "The existence of a sexual relationship," they insisted, "is not a matter which should be inquired into by the courts."

As the president of the New Zealand Conference of Bishops pointed out "there are other aspects to these relationships besides sex. These other aspects sometimes need to be governed by justice and equity ... To uphold justice and equity is not to condone unchastity."

Did the upper New England bishops strike the only magisterial pose that one could expect from a group of Catholic bishops? No. The New Zealand hierarchy has shown that there is another, less pastorally rigid way to approach this controversial issue — a way that is at the same time consistent with Catholic doctrine.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Attitude can mold Christ's teaching

14th Sunday of the Year (July 9): (R3) Mark 6:1-6; (R1) Ezekiel 2:2-5; (R2) 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.

In Sunday's Gospel, Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth. He came as a rabbi, a teacher. So on the Sabbath, he began to teach in their synagogue.

His teaching was greeted, not with wonder and awe, but with contempt. "Where did he get all this?" they asked. "What kind of wisdom is he endowed with? Isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary?" Familiarity breeds contempt.

The Greek word for "carpenter" is *tekton* (the root for the word "technology"). In the days of our Lord, a carpenter was a technologist, who could put his hand to anything needing to be built. Such an art did not give one the right to teach.

So the people of Nazareth despised Jesus when he taught because he was a working man. This fact about Jesus underscores the dignity of work. God the Father sent his Son into the world as a carpenter. That's what God thought about ordinary everyday work! We must always be on guard against the temptation to evaluate a person by what he does and not by what he is. Man judges by the appearance, but God sees the heart.

It is not rare for some people to judge



a word
for
sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a book by its cover. The Nazarenes did just that. "Isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary?" First of all, these words tell us that apparently at this time Joseph was dead, for Jesus is called "the son of Mary." Secondly, the people spoke of James and Joseph and Judas and Simon as the brothers of Jesus, and their sisters as the sisters of Jesus. "Aren't his sisters our neighbors here?"

Mary was Ever-Virgin. This was declared a dogma of faith against the Monothelites by the Lateran Council in 649. The persons mentioned in Sunday's Gospel as the "brothers" and "sisters" of Jesus were actually his cousins. They were the children of the brother of St. Joseph, Clopas (also called Alphaeus) and Clopas' wife, Mary. Thus, when John

names the women who stood by the cross of Jesus on Calvary, he names three Marys: "Mary, the Mother of Jesus, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala" (John 19:25). Joseph was named by Clopas after his brother, St. Joseph.

Because of the unbelief of the Nazarenes, Jesus did not work many miracles there apart from curing a few who were sick. Always in our Lord's life, faith was the condition for working miracles.

In philosophy there is a saying that "Whatever is received is received according to the mindset of the recipient." In other words, the receiver controls the input. The soil determines the fruitfulness of the seed. The container shapes the water poured into it. So our attitudes can mold even the teachings of Jesus. One can't preach rightly in the wrong atmosphere. Even Jesus could not.

If people come to hear no other viewpoint than their own, that is all they'll hear. How many will not listen to the church when her teaching differs from their opinions? If, however, a person comes to hear the word of God in love and humility, the seed of God's word will produce an abundant harvest.

We can open the door wide to Jesus by how we come to Mass or we can slam

it in his face as the Nazarenes did.

The awful tragedy is we have only one life to live. Now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation. We must seize the present moment. It was St. Augustine who said, "I do not fear the coming of Jesus, but only that he might not come this way again."

How earnestly we ought to pray the prayer in the response: "To you I lift up my eyes ... till he have pity on us."

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, July 10

Hosea 2:16, 17-18, 21-22;

Matthew 9:18-26

Tuesday, July 11

Hosea 8:4-7, 11-13; Matthew 9:32-38

Wednesday, July 12

Hosea 10:1-3, 7-8, 12; Matthew 10:1-7

Thursday, July 13

Hosea 11:1-4, 8-9; Matthew 10:7-15

Friday, July 14

Hosea 14:2-10; Matthew 10:16-23

Saturday, July 15

Isaiah 6:1-8; Matthew 10:24-33

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GENERAL

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