

New Catholic Guidelines Welcome Gay Parishoners, But Condemn Behavior

Posted by [TBN](#) On 11/14/2006

Catholic bishops approved by a large margin Tuesday a plan for ministering to gays and lesbians in the church with "respect, compassion, and sensitivity," while maintaining that homosexual acts are "always wrong."

A statement adopted by an 85 percent majority at the final day of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops here says that same-sex attraction in itself is not sinful, but that Catholics with a "homosexual inclination" should choose a life of chastity because gay sex and gay relationships are still seen as "disordered" in the eyes of the church.

Homosexual acts are disordered, said Bishop Arthur J. Serratelli of the Diocese of Paterson, New Jersey, who heads the commission that produced the new guidelines, because they are not in line with what the Catholic church defines as the divine plan for human sexuality.

"The moral law...applies to everyone," Serratelli said. "Chaste living as a condition of receipt of Communion is for everyone."

Bishop Serratelli made certain to include the use of contraception and sex outside of marriage as acts that the church considers "disordered" as well.

"They keep focusing on sexual genital activity, not loving, committed relationships between consenting adults," said Sam Sinnett, president of Dignity U.S.A., an advocacy group for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Catholics.

Sinnett described Dignity U.S.A. members as "deeply disappointed" with the language of the new guidelines, passing them off as a more politically correct version of the Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics, put forward by the commission on church doctrine in 1975.

Section eight of the 1975 declaration says, in part, that "...judgment of Scripture does not of course permit us to conclude that all those who suffer from this anomaly (homosexuality) are personally responsible for it, but it does attest to the fact that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and can in no case be approved of."

The guidelines adopted by the conference of bishops Tuesday states, "We are all damaged by the effects of sin, which causes desires to become disordered. Simply possessing such inclinations does not constitute a sin...Acting on such inclinations, however, is always wrong."

"I'd agree that maybe it's a little less offensive," said Sinnett, "but they're still using the same spiritually violent language as they did 20 years ago."

Sinnett believes that church rhetoric on the issue will only serve to further alienate gay Catholics. Nonetheless, church response to parishoner sexual behavior led the agenda on the final day of the Catholic Bishops conference, though, with another resolution upholding the church's teachings against contraception and pre-marital sex passing with 94.8 percent approval.

The bishops defended their hard-line stance to the press after the morning's closed session.

"Jesus himself said that to follow Him is to follow a narrow way," said Archbishop George H. Niederauer of the diocese of San Francisco. "The church teaches a very demanding teaching, but also hangs with people all their lives long."

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