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The Catholic Case for Inclusion

By DAVID E. DECOSSE

THE SAD PARADE IS OVER. There can be little question that the Ancient Order of Hibernians (A.O.H.) had the legal right to exclude the Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization (I.L.G.O.) from the St. Patrick's Day Parade in New York City. But it is not clear, as the Hibernians and their supporters have claimed, that Roman Catholic teaching required the exclusion of I.L.G.O. from the line of march. Indeed, a close look at this affair reveals not only the weakness of the theological arguments mustered against I.L.G.O. but also the strength of the Catholic case for inclusion.

The Catholic arguments to exclude I.L.G.O. have followed two primary lines: One approach has represented a mistaken view of Catholic teaching while the other is more tenuous than it would appear in light of the fact that it is based on a law of the church.

Francis Beirne, an A.O.H. leader, has voiced the mistaken line of argument. I.L.G.O. could not march, he has said, "because they are homosexual." Homosexuality, he has gone on to say, is a mortal sin in the eyes of the church. This point of view has been widely repeated in the press. Thus Ray Kerrison of the New York Post has said, "Since the church condemns homosexuality as sinful, it would violate the Hibernians' right of free association to force them to accept the homosexual marchers." William Safire of The New York Times weighed in similarly: "The organizers of New York's annual St. Patrick's Day parade—Catholics who believe homosexuality is a sin—should not be coerced by the city into including an Irish gay-rights contingent in their parade."

But this neat categorization of homosexuality as sinful obliterates the clear distinction in Catholic teaching between a homosexual orientation—which is not culpable

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in itself—and homosexual acts, which are considered subject matter for sin. By collapsing this distinction Mr. Beirne and many others have perpetuated the view that a homosexual person *per se* can be discriminated against—a position that not only finds no justification in Catholic teaching but that also is positively opposed by it.

The other exclusionary argument has both disavowed any discrimination against homosexuals and followed the distinction between orientation and acts. According to this line of reasoning, the inclusion of I.L.G.O. in the parade would create an unacceptable public confusion about the church's teaching and could be construed as endorsing a sinful life.

IN PART, though, this argument has depended on imputing to I.L.G.O. an agenda that the tiny group does not have. Thus, at one point I.L.G.O. was told they could march if they denounced ACT-UP's infamous desecration of St. Patrick's Cathedral in 1989, an event that justifiably outraged Catholics in the city. But, I.L.G.O. responded, they had nothing to do with what happened in the cathedral; moreover, many of the group's members were not even living in the United States at the time. I.L.G.O. is also said to have a political and ideological agenda. But by charter, according to Anne Maguire, an I.L.G.O. spokeswoman, the group has no stands on any issues and exists to allow its members to share the experience of being Irish and gay or lesbian in New York City. Those desiring to exclude the group also charge that the banner I.L.G.O. wished to carry would proclaim its disagreement with church teaching. But, Ms. Maguire said, the banner reads, "Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization"—wording that does not present an obvious contradiction to Catholic morality.

These inflated charges against I.L.G.O., however, do not in themselves diminish the core argument for exclusion: that the group's very character as a public association of homosexuals not overtly in agreement with

Catholic teaching in itself contradicts the church's prohibition against homosexual activity. As George Clough, national president of the A.O.H., put it: I.L.G.O.'s "purpose is to extol a lifestyle that is contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church."

THE WEAKNESS in this argument is indicated by Mr. Clough's use of the word "lifestyle," a term invoked repeatedly by the A.O.H. and the Archdiocese of New York. For Catholic teaching clearly prohibits homosexual sexual acts; but there is no similar prohibition against a gay or lesbian "lifestyle," whatever that vague word can be said to mean. This is not a meaningless semantic difference. For if it is sexual acts that are the subject matter for sin, then the strength of the Hibernians' case to exclude I.L.G.O. depends on whether the gay and lesbian group promotes those activities in a way manifestly at odds with Catholic teaching and on the closeness of the causal relationship between including the group in the parade and the occurrence of activity considered sinful. But on neither point are the Hibernians on solid ground. Moreover, the weakness of the argument for exclusion is reflected in its reliance on the catch-all word "lifestyle" to make a more sweeping determination on I.L.G.O.'s moral status than is warranted by the nature of the group.

But to say that the arguments for exclusion are weak is not the same as to say that the inclusion of I.L.G.O. poses no question at all for Catholics. It would be naïve to assume that such an expressly homosexual group did not accept gay and lesbian relationships in a way that does not correspond exactly to Catholic teaching. Moreover, following the desecration of St. Patrick's and a host of other incidents, Catholics in New York are justifiably wary of anti-Catholic gay activists cropping up in a Catholic parade. But the ambiguity between Catholic doctrine and I.L.G.O.'s intentions suggested by these reservations creates several possibilities. One way of reacting would be to evaluate this ambiguity alongside other Catholic values, such as the merit of not overextending a law—the prohibition against homosexual sexual acts—into a situation in which it doubtfully applies. But another way of reacting has sadly carried the day. For into the ambiguity suggested by these reservations has rushed a spirit of definitive judgment.

Indeed, the predominant Catholic position in this dispute has been marked by a tragic insistence on law at the expense of a pastoral tradition that could have been invoked to resolve the problem. For it has been a hallmark of the church for centuries to find ways to stick to its principles but nevertheless coexist with others who may not agree with these principles, may not live up to them or may have no position regarding them. This flexible tradition may surprise some who regard the church as an institution of implacable law. It may remind others of sleight-of-hand thinking that has been dismissed as "Jesuitical."

But often this pastoral wisdom has kept differences—intellectual or moral—in perspective and enhanced a common life.

At a personal level, many Catholics have encountered this wisdom in confession. There, for instance, the counsel of a priest might illuminate a scrupulous fixation on law that is suffocating the relationship of love at the heart of faith. At a broader level, this pastoral tradition is marked by an appreciation for the moral importance of concrete circumstances and of complex questions of value. St. Albert the Great gave concise expression to an important aspect of this approach when he said: "The real must not be bent to the rule; it is the rule which must be adapted to the real." Through the centuries this tradition has permitted the church to adapt to changing times—times in the past not unlike the tremendous changes today in thinking about sexuality.

Among the important practical implications of this tradition is the principle of toleration—a principle that could be invoked to include I.L.G.O. in the parade. This principle has a technical meaning different from the relativism suggested by the common usage of the word "tolerance," as in the importance of tolerating all points of view without determining that one is better than the another. For in the church's tradition, "toleration" means that the ones being tolerant—in this case the A.O.H. and the archdiocese—hold fast to their moral principle but for the sake of other values permit an action related to that principle—here, the inclusion of I.L.G.O. in the parade—that they otherwise could forbid.

And there *are* many other Catholic values at stake in the parade: not further alienating homosexuals from the church; the positive obligation publicly to recognize the personhood and infinite worth of the members of I.L.G.O. and, by extension, of all homosexuals; the merit of demonstrably recognizing a group representative of a gay and lesbian population that has suffered terribly from AIDS and that is subject often in this city to violence and hate (according to one recent survey, New York City leads the nation in bias crimes against homosexuals); the acknowledgement that the contribution of thousands of gay men and lesbian women of all nationalities and creeds is indispensable to the common good of the city.

AT THE HEART OF Catholic faith is an exuberant affirmation of life. This affirmation is a response to a graciousness permeating the world—a graciousness present no less in the personhood of gay men and lesbian women than in the thousands of the usual proud marchers streaming past St. Patrick's Cathedral. It is among those happy thousands that I.L.G.O. belongs. For the greatest tribute to Catholic faith would be that for the space of I.L.G.O.'s walk up Fifth Avenue a spirit might descend along the slow line of march and remind a broken city for a few moments of the possibility of a common life. ■