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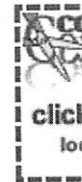
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Vatican denounces conference on gays Controversial Louisville forum will include Mass

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The Courier-Journal

A national conference promoting the acceptance of gays and lesbians in the Catholic Church that begins today in Louisville has drawn a denunciation from the Vatican.

Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone, secretary of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which is responsible for promoting and defending Catholic doctrine and morals, has gone as far as forbidding any Masses to be held at the conference.

But the conference sponsor plans to celebrate Mass tomorrow, contending that it is permissible under church law.

New Ways Ministry, the sponsor of the conference at the Galt House, "does not promote the authentic teaching of the Catholic Church," which teaches that sex outside of marriage is sinful, Bertone wrote to Archbishop Thomas Kelly, head of the Louisville archdiocese.

"Because of the confusion and scandal which will inevitably arise from this event," Bertone asked Kelly to tell participants they "do not have permission to celebrate the Eucharist as part of their conference."

Kelly relayed Bertone's comments in a letter to New Ways Ministry, but he also invited conference participants to attend regularly scheduled Masses at the Cathedral of the Assumption, a few blocks from the Galt House.

But Francis DeBernardo, executive director of New Ways, said Mass would be celebrated by Bishop Leroy Matthesen, a bishop emeritus from Amarillo, Texas. DeBernardo said the organization checked with canon lawyers and determined that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith cannot forbid such a Mass, and that Archbishop Kelly himself did not ban it.

DeBernardo said the Mass would not be a protest but would emphasize prayer for the unity of the church.

"There's a sense of energy that people are able to claim their rights as Catholics, and to do so peacefully without anger and without malice," he said.

In addition to Matthesen, Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of the Archdiocese of Detroit and several scholars and authors will speak to the gathering of 500 people. Organizers plan to issue

a 12-point call for more dialogue and education on homosexuality in all aspects of the church.

New Ways Ministry -- a private group founded 25 years ago -- holds national conferences every five years. It has been indirectly involved in other conflicts with the Vatican.

In 1999, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith ordered the group's founders -- the Rev. Robert Nugent and Sister Jeannine Gramick -- to end their work with gays and lesbians because they refused to condemn homosexuality as intrinsically evil.

DeBernardo disputed Bertone's statement about New Ways' teaching as conflicting with that of the church. That's "a rumor that has been around for 25 years," DeBernardo said.

New Ways conforms to teachings by the Vatican, bishops and the catechism, DeBernardo said.

Co-founders Gramick and Nugent were censured, but they have not been affiliated with New Ways since 1984, he said, and the organization has never been under church sanction.

"No church official has ever contacted New Ways Ministry to see if what we're doing is or is not in line with church teaching," he said.

Kelly will not attend the conference, and he is neither encouraging nor discouraging local Catholics to attend.

In a written statement, the archdiocese said it is not promoting, sponsoring or supporting the conference. It said Maryland-based New Ways scheduled the conference without consulting it.

Kelly said he supported the Vatican directive on the Mass at the convention "as coming here with Papal authority, and I had hoped for its acceptance."

"I think that New Ways Ministry is trying to do good work, but it has to do that work within the context of the Church's teaching," he said in the statement. "That is not always easily achieved."

The official catechism of the Catholic Church says homosexual acts are "contrary to the natural law" and that "under no circumstances can they be approved."

It does call for acceptance of people with a homosexual orientation.

"The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible," the catechism says. "This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God's will in their lives."

One of the conference speakers -- Helen Deines, interim director of Spalding University's School of Social Work -- said she was disappointed with the Vatican's stance on the Mass.

"I can't believe (in) using the Eucharist as a weapon," said Deines, who will lead a workshop on promoting gay acceptance in parishes. "That would be a very strange thing to do, particularly at an event endorsed by so many religious communities (and) where bishops are speaking."

"Gay and lesbian Catholics are everywhere and are making themselves known, and so every corner of the church needs to respond," DeBernardo said.

The conference brochure lists dozens of organizations throughout the country endorsing the event. Locally, they include the social responsibility committee of the Church of the Epiphany in Louisville, the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Ky., and the Denver-based Sisters of Loretto, who have strong Kentucky ties.

Gramick joined the Loretos last year, transferring from the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

DeBernardo said organizers would issue a 12-point strategy plan at the conference's conclusion on Sunday.

While not revealing specifics, DeBernardo said the plan would call for more education and dialogue on the subject, involving bishops, educators, lay persons and others.

DeBernardo said that when his organization formed in 1977, there was much opposition to gay and lesbian ministries in the Catholic Church.

"Homosexuality was not addressed in the church because not much was known about it," he said. "There's a lot known about homosexuality today." He said many Catholic priests, teachers and others "want to be welcoming of gay and lesbian people but are unaware of the best approaches."

A number of Catholic churches across the country have adopted programs to reach out to gays and lesbians.

At the Cathedral of the Assumption, the Rev. Bill Fichteman said that while the parish does not have a specific ministry to homosexuals, they are welcome to participate in all activities.

"Basically, we want gay and lesbian Catholics to know they are welcome at the cathedral," he said. "It's a welcome and an invitation to be incorporated into the community like anybody else."

He said that people's personal lives and relationships are important but that the church needs to deal with them "pastorally."

"I doubt there are too many people that come to our cathedral church that are absolutely perfect in adhering to church teaching," he said. "If we made that a criterion for membership, we would have a pretty empty church."

In a statement, Kelly said: "I have been very pleased with the mature developments that have occurred in our ministry to the homosexual community. Members of the homosexual community have found acceptance and support in our parishes. The church's teaching about

homosexual activity remains clear, but it is often difficult to accept. As we struggle to achieve this acceptance, the support of our parishes is essential."

Deines said she has been working to promote acceptance of gays and lesbians in churches since the AIDS crisis erupted in the early 1980s.

"Doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals would say these people are evil, they got what they deserved," she said. She and a colleague decided "we've got to be working with faith communities."

In her talk, Deines hopes to draw on her experiences in helping other parishes address homosexuality.

Often, she admits, "I was really offensive" in talking to church groups, being insensitive to people with different views on sexuality.

"I'm hoping to use some of the things we did wrong" in helping other parishes address the issue, she said.

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