

Even cardinals have bad days

Homosexual Catholics, along with all other Catholics, have a right to the sacraments, and the church has an obligation to provide them

By Eugene Cullen Kennedy

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Rev. John Jay Hughes, a distinguished Catholic scholar, recently reminded me that if we could read the mail that crosses a Catholic bishop's desk every day, we would be more sympathetic to them and more understanding of the statements they make and the orders they give.

What, then, passed across Cardinal Francis George's desk or path that convinced him that the very best thing he could do on Pentecost, the greatest feast of the church year, was to order the good priests at Holy Name Cathedral to deny the Eucharist last month to homosexuals wearing rainbow sashes?

What theological revelation exploded like old-fashioned flash powder to wash the cardinal's mind with its light, leading him to decide that taking a stand against sash-wearing gays was the perfect public way to celebrate the church's enlightenment by the Holy Spirit?

He claimed that "... the order ... wasn't a condemnation of homosexuality, but a declaration of the Eucharist's sanctity." Even Catholics sympathetic to the cardinal's daily pressures are hard pressed, not to say puzzled, at how sash-wearers could threaten the Eucharist's sanctity by presenting themselves to receive it.

And they may think that the cardinal needs more time away from the office after his explanation that "Communion is about Jesus Christ. It's not supposed to be any other kind of statement. ... They can receive Communion, but not by protesting."

Protesting seems to be the operative word in the cardinal's insight. He expressed great distress a few years ago that gays were demonstrating outside Holy Name Cathedral and ordered that Communion not be distributed to any of them. Then-cathedral pastor Rev. Robert McLaughlin intervened, expressing a fairly Catholic thought, "We don't deny Communion to anyone at Holy Name." That's the kind of Christian behavior, according to some observers, that led to McLaughlin's departure, by way of a one-sentence letter from the cardinal, some months later.

Homosexual Catholics, along with all other Catholics, have a right to the sacraments, according to Canon 213 of church law, and the cardinal, along with all other bishops, has an obligation to provide them.

Gay Catholics wear rainbow sashes to identify themselves publicly as believers who want to practice their faith and to be nourished by the sacraments. These men and women did not roll

raucously down the aisle on the floats of a gay-pride parade. Nor did they carry placards, shout, wave or set fire to anything. They did not disrupt the liturgical celebration but only presented themselves, as all Catholics do, as sinners seeking forgiveness, as humans hungry for the bread of the Eucharist.

Gays have grounds for protest, of course, especially after a Vatican document claimed that they bear within them "an intrinsic disorder," and Pope John Paul II's spokesman speculated that homosexuals may not be capable of valid ordination to the priesthood.

Many commentators have tried to make them the scapegoats for the entire clergy sex-abuse scandal, which has brought so much grief in recent years.

But they were not protesting or inscribing heretical theses on the cathedral doors. They were being Catholics, like every other Catholic in the cathedral, aware of their sinfulness and also aware that one of the effects of the Eucharist is the forgiveness of our sins.

The cardinal may have acted after a bad day to give gays a worse morning, and it is hard to see how his conspiracy theory of protest holds up. Is there, we might ask, a less Catholic thing to do than to give these men and women a handshake in place of the sacrament?

How many Knights of Columbus of some papal order have entered Holy Name Cathedral wearing sashes over hearts as hardened and corrupted as any in the history of Christendom? How many murderous gangsters have been borne down this aisle to have priests bury them with a mass and a last blessing if the most basic thing about Catholicism is not its willingness to face and forgive sinners?

How many clerics, wearing sashes of their own on their cassocks, have been more hypocritical than these sash-wearing gays about themselves and their lives? Perhaps we can understand that even cardinals have bad days, but these days should not lead them to demean people who have been demeaned enough already and to make Catholicism seem the abode of the perfect when it is best understood as a home for sinners.