

CHURCH CHAT

BY

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DOCTRINE VS. MISSION

This past summer, the State of Illinois passed a civil union law that, among other things, made it discriminatory for a group to refuse to work with unmarried couples, gay or straight, in providing foster care and adoptions.

Catholic dioceses all over the state scrambled for a way to protect their foster care and adoption programs. Most of those programs get most of their money for these services from the state, so the law now says that they must consider gay and/or unmarried couples as potential foster or adoptive parents.

Guess what that did? After some legal protests, the Church pulled out of the state supported foster care and adoption business because the new law recognizes the legitimacy of civil unions and official church teaching says that's a no-no.

In other words, doctrine trumped mission.

My home diocese, Belleville, added another wrinkle. Since foster care and adoptions are the major services offered by our Catholic Social Services, dropping them to comply with state law would truncate the department. They would have to lay off most of the staff and, more importantly, abandon about 600 children in foster care or adopted homes.

So, guess what Catholic Social Services did? They severed ties with the diocese, formed their own organization, changed their name to Christian Social Services, kept the contracts with the state, and continued the foster care and adoption programs.

In other words, mission trumped doctrine.

There are multiple dimensions to this whole issue: the relationship between church and state; what values take priority; when to compromise and when to maintain principles; when to ignore a situation and when to highlight that same situation; and some things I can't think of right now.

But here's a minor one that I can think of immediately: apparently it's not okay to accept qualified gay or unmarried couples as foster or adoptive parents if you are Catholic but it is okay if you are Christian.

Help me out here. Since I lived for over twenty years in Tulsa, OK, the home town of Oral Roberts University and many other fundamentalist churches, I spent a lot of time insisting that Catholics are Christians. Looks like I was wrong again!

It's not that I find fault with the fine folks at Catholic (woops, Christian) Social Services (I know many of them). It's just that the name change raises lots of confusing issues. For example, being Catholic now includes being against gay and unmarried couple *plus* being willing to abandon 600 kids who need foster care or adoption. Being Christian now includes accepting qualified gay and unmarried couples as possible foster care and adoptive parents, *and* provides continuing service to all those kids.

It's getting harder and harder being a Catholic Christian.

This is not just a local, Illinois dilemma. The core issues are worldwide. What takes precedence, dogma or service? When it gets down to the bottom line, what determines the final, practical decision, doctrine or mission?

In this case, I side with mission. Loving gay and unmarried couples can provide a more nurturing family environment than many married, heterosexual couples. Besides, civil union partners who volunteer as foster or adoptive parents show some desire for what could be a very difficult commitment. Obviously, all these parents need to meet appropriate criteria before they are accepted, but no one should be excluded simply because they are in a civil union.

How does this position square with my Catholicism? Not very well, I'm afraid. Actually, this situation is one of many that create a tension between doctrine and mission. My goal is to experience these tensions as creative rather than destructive.

I wish my diocese would continue its support of Catholic Social Services officially. It was an agency that made me proud to be Catholic. The mingling of church and state is inherently problematic; in this case, it is worth the dogmatic complications. It will be interesting to see how well Catholics donate to the new agency compared to how well they contribute to the diocese.

Someone could argue that the state could find some other way to continue their foster care and adoptive services rather than outsourcing them to Catholic Social Services. But since nothing is in place for that approach immediately, a severe interruption of services seems inevitable. Those kids deserve better.

I applaud Christian Social Services for continuing their mission. They are still Catholic to me.