

BEWARE LAY CLERICALISM

Catholic League president Bill Donohue comments on a controversy that has embroiled a Catholic school in Washington state:

Two teachers at Kennedy Catholic High School, located in the Seattle area, recently resigned, and although neither school authorities, the Archdiocese of Seattle nor the teachers are speaking to the media, it is understood that both teachers, a man and a woman, were engaged to a person of the same sex, thus forcing the issue.

This should be a slam dunk case. Those who teach at Catholic schools sign a contract pledging to uphold Catholic teachings. Indeed, teachers in this archdiocese voluntarily agree that "if the teacher's life-style is incompatible with Catholic moral values or if his/her conduct is at variance with Catholic teaching," they can be fired.

The Catholic Church, like so many other religions, does not condone gay marriage. Ergo, homosexual teachers at a Catholic school who claim to be engaged or married to someone of the same sex are at variance with Catholic teaching.

A small protest outside the Archdiocese of Seattle drew dissident Catholics who supported the insubordinate teachers. Some dissidents said such things as, "I don't believe this is in line with Jesus' mission." Greg Nickels, ex-mayor of Seattle, argued the teachers were fired "because they are gay." State Sen. Joe Nguyen said the archdiocese was "on the wrong side of history."

It is important to note that, assuming the teachers were fired, they most certainly were not let go because they were homosexuals (presumably this was known to at least some at the school before their engagement). It was their planned marital status that was controlling.

The reaction of the protesters smacks of lay clericalism. Lay people have an important role in the life of the Church, but they are not empowered to make decisions that are the proper reserve of the bishop. Canon 806 states that the diocesan bishop has the right to oversee and inspect Catholic schools (including those run by religious orders).

Pope John Paul II explicitly warned against lay clericalism. The laity are entitled to a “consultative voice,” he said, but the final authority rests with the bishop. The bishop “must hear the faithful, clergy and laity, to form an opinion,” but, he added, “the latter may not formulate a definitive judgment on the Church” as “it corresponds to the bishop to discern and pronounce himself, not on a mere question of conscience, but as a teacher of the faith.”

Those who claim that the Church is “on the wrong side of history” are badly educated in the Catholic faith. The Church is committed to the pursuit of truth—that is the only side it seeks to be on—and properly eschews that which is trendy and fashionable. That is suitable for politicians and preteens.