

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

November 17, 2006

You may have read this week that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops approved 4 statements at their annual November meeting. The statements addressed: war in Iraq; marriage and contraception; ministry to gays and lesbians; and reception of Holy Communion. As I did several weeks ago, I urge you to read the documents before coming to conclusions about them based on media reports. The texts are available online at www.usccb.org Some will find comfort in these statements and some will be discomfited by them. Thus far, my considerable email on these statements has come from the discomfited.

Not surprisingly, the media has focused on the last three statements with little or no attention paid to the statement on the war. This week the American bishops continued to seriously critique our nation's involvement in this war, giving their affirmation to a timely statement by Conference President Bishop William Skylstad that calls for serious and civil dialogue on a morally responsible transition in Iraq. The central message of the statement is that the search for genuine justice and peace in Iraq requires moral urgency, substantive dialogue and new directions.

The other three statements break no new theological ground even if they do serve to raise a number of questions on several sides of some very important issues. When polls indicate that only 4% of Catholic couples practice family planning by a method sanctioned by the Church, it is certainly not surprising that Catholic bishops would address this question. When the rights of gay and lesbian people are contested and constantly in the news and when questions related to the marriage of same-sex couples are on, or not on, the ballot in a number of states, it is not surprising that Catholic bishops would speak to how the Church ministers to all whose lives are affected by such matters. In a time when questions about how we worship and understand the Eucharist are answered in many different ways, it's no surprise that the bishops would address themselves to this sacrament at the heart of our Christian lives and how we spiritually approach it.

The statement on contraception is meant for all Catholic people but the bishops intend that it be distributed to engaged couples who approach Catholic parishes to prepare for the celebration of a Catholic wedding and marriage. Many engaged couples (including those planning a Catholic wedding) are already using some form of artificial birth control because they are either cohabitating or involved in a full sexual relationship even if they keep different residences. I believe that what's at stake here and needs addressing is the way sexual permissiveness has permeated our culture, our Church, our families and their lives. What are Catholic families and parishes teaching pre-teens and teens about sexuality? What social and dating patterns do Catholic families and parishes encourage? discourage? enable? When, how and by whom are Catholic teens given advice about sexual activity? Who has the courage to monitor our young peoples' activities and decisions? How many parents help their teens obtain birth control? What do Catholic families teach their children when cohabitation is treated lightly or even encouraged? These are the questions that need attention because for many couples, a brochure handed to them as they prepare for a wedding will be many years too late to make a difference.

The statement on ministry to gay and lesbian persons is titled, *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care*. Although a previous document by the bishops (*Always Our Children*) encouraged the use of the terms gay and lesbian, this text studiously avoids them: in a 26 page document there is no instance of the word lesbian and the word gay appears only twice, in quotation marks, around the phrase "gay subcultures." The bishops on the committee which prepared the text acknowledged that they consulted with no gay men or lesbians in preparing the document, although they note in the document's conclusion that, "it is important that Church ministers listen to the experiences, needs and hopes of the persons with a homosexual inclination to whom and with whom they minister. Dialogue provides an exchange of information, and also communicates a respect for the innate dignity of other persons and a respect for their consciences. 'Authentic dialogue, therefore, is aimed above all at the rebirth of individuals through interior conversion and repentance, but always with profound respect for consciences and with patience and at the step-by-step pace indispensable for modern conditions.' [John Paul II] Such dialogue facilitates an ongoing, interior conversion for all parties truly engaged in the exchange." I don't know if the document would have been any different had the bishops followed their own advice but my pastoral experience has taught me that this

is good advice, indeed. How such recommended dialogue failed to be part of this document's preparation boggles the ecclesial imagination.

Some of the questions I posed above regarding how families and parishes teach children about sexuality apply here just as well. Whether our young people are straight or gay, questions and concerns raised in the context of our sexually drenched culture need honest, informed response.

A particular instance the bishops' document addresses is the Church's response to requests for the baptism of children adopted by same-sex couples. The bishops call this a "serious pastoral concern" but go on to say that while such requests should not be denied "there must be a well founded hope that the children will be brought up in the Catholic religion." Of course, such a "well founded hope" is expected of *any* parents (regardless of their sexual orientation or marital state) who present a child for baptism. My own experience is that those few gay and lesbian couples who present a child for Catholic baptism have seriously thought and prayed before making such a request and offer more than adequate evidence of their desire and intention to raise their child in the Catholic faith. My "serious pastoral concern" is with the many straight couples who present children for baptism whom we will not see again until First Communion and then not again until Confirmation.

Finally, the bishops issued a statement entitled, *Happy Are Those Who Are Called to His Supper: On Preparing to Receive Christ Worthily in the Eucharist*. Having grown up in a time when Catholic people were careful, even scrupulous in deciding when they would and would not come forward to receive Communion, I certainly understand the bishops' concern to address this question in a time when virtually everyone comes forward to share in the Bread and Cup of the Eucharist. You are probably aware that a few American Catholic bishops have made statements in their own dioceses with regard to Catholic elected public officials and the relationship between their political stands and their worthiness to receive Communion. Some bishops have drawn a very clear line in the sand about this issue. An important thing to note is that in this new document the bishops address *all* Catholics in their "personal and professional" lives, and not only public officials. The document at hand addresses a number of concerns about worthy preparation for receiving the sacrament and says, *If a Catholic in his or her personal or professional life were knowingly and obstinately to reject the defined doctrines of the Church, or knowingly and obstinately to repudiate her definitive teaching on moral issues, however, he or she would seriously diminish his or her communion with the Church. Reception of Holy Communion in such a situation would not accord with the nature of the Eucharistic celebration, so that he or she should refrain.* The careful language in this quotation is material for a doctoral dissertation and, in reality, leaves open as many doors as it appears to close. What does it mean to *reject* Church doctrines? What does it mean to reject them *knowingly and obstinately*? Which are the Church's *defined* doctrines? *definitive* teachings? What does it mean to say that one's communion with the Church is *diminished*? In the world of ecclesial language, these are not small considerations and such documents are carefully written.

The bishops also offer examples of failures in obedience to God's law (based on the 10 commandments) which might lead an individual Catholic to refrain from receiving Communion. Interesting to note here is that an effort at the bishops' meeting to add contraception to this list of sins was defeated by a vote of **148-75**... this vote taken in the same week the bishops issued a document restating the Church's ban on artificial birth control...

Much debate will come of these statements but I'm not sure that the deepest issue will come to the fore. What are we to understand of a situation when the belief and practice of so many Catholic people are in conflict with their bishops' teaching? Bishops (and pastors!) and their people *always* have more to learn about our faith, its demands and how we hand on the truths of our faith. It is not enough for bishops to expect that restatement of doctrine will get everyone in line. Nor is it enough for the people of the Church to disagree with and dismiss teachings and instructions which they have spent little or no time studying. There is often a great chasm between these two groups and the tension generated is often wired through the life and ministers of the local parish. Bishops (and pastors) have much to learn from their people and the people (and pastors) have much to learn from their bishops.

As we approach Thanksgiving I am grateful for the many loving, generous married couples in our parish and the ways in which they give of themselves to their children and to the faith community. I'm also grateful for the gay and lesbian members of our parish and for the gifts they bring to parish life. Finally, I am grateful for all who gather to share the Lord's Supper in the Eucharist each weekend. Together we acknowledge our unworthiness to feast at such a table and at the same give thanks to God that we are welcome there nonetheless.

To date, **131** (of 1,200 households) have returned their pledge forms. Of these, **40** households have signed on for contributing through EFT, **68** households will contribute by the parish envelope system and **10** households through online banking. Some households did not indicate a preference for a method of contributing. Of the 131 households, our records show that **58** have pledged to increase their contribution in amounts ranging from \$5.00 to \$40.00 a week. Your returning your pledge form will help our Parish Finance Council have an accurate basis on which to budget and plan our parish life and outreach! After Thanksgiving I will publish a FAQ page in our continuing effort to help you understand parish finances.

Sincerely,
Fr. Fleming