

‘Gay marriage’ and Father Keenan, once again

I regret having to revisit this matter, but as a point of personal honor has been raised, I must.

In early 2003, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts engaged in a vigorous public debate over the definition of marriage. A proposed constitutional amendment defining marriage as the stable union of a man and a woman, H.3190, was introduced in the Massachusetts legislature. On April 28, 2003, three Catholic priests, including Father James Keenan, S.J. (now of Boston College) testified against H.3190.

Father Keenan began his testimony as follows: “I am here today to testify against H.3190 because it is contrary to Catholic teaching on social justice.” Father Keenan concluded his testimony on the same note: “as a priest and as a moral theologian, I cannot see how anyone could use the Roman Catholic tradition to support H. 3190.”

On June 2, 2003, staff members of the Massachusetts Catholic Conference (MCC) issued a “Memorandum by MCC Staff on the Erroneous Testimony on Catholic Teaching” that had been given at the April 28 hearing. The memorandum made the following points:

* In the course of his argument against the Massachusetts marriage amendment, which he claimed would “deny ‘gays and lesbians’ the ‘full range of human and civil rights,’ Father Keenan erroneously stated that ‘(t)his same position has been endorsed by the United States Catholic Bishops.’”

* Father Keenan and his fellow witnesses did not inform the MCC, “the official

representative of the Catholic bishops of Massachusetts before the state Legislature,” of their proposed testimony beforehand, nor did they inform the committee that they were speaking without the knowledge or approval of the MCC.

* All three priests who testified, including Father Keenan, “mischaracterized the teaching of the Catholic Church generally, while two (including Father Keenan) mischaracterized the position of the Catholic Bishops specifically,” by attempting to buttress their position with the U.S. bishops’ statement “Always Our Children.”

* As a result of Father Keenan’s testimony and that of his fellow witnesses, “members of the committee expressed their confusion about the Catholic Church’s position on the (marriage) amendment, on same-sex marriage and on their moral responsibility as legislators.” The MCC staffers also noted that, based on their conversation with committee members, “the testimony left the false impression that the priests were speaking from authority, and that their private opinions represented the official position of the Catholic Church.”

Father Keenan’s Boston College colleague, Father David Hollenbach, S.J., has now denounced as “malicious slander” a recent column in which I wrote that Father Keenan’s testimony had argued that “the principles of Catholic social doctrine did not merely tolerate ‘gay marriage,’ they demanded it.” That was arguably too telegraphic an interpretation of Father Keenan’s rhetorical dexterity, both in his testimony and in a subsequent “clarification” issued after public criticism of his position. So here is my emendation, based entirely on the public record:

In his 2003 testimony before the Massachusetts state legislature, Father Keenan argued that a constitutional amendment defining marriage as the stable union of a man and a woman offended Catholic social justice principles and ought to be rejected. In the course of his testimony, Father Keenan misrepresented the teaching of the American bishops, appealed to a theologically dubious magisterium of

theologians, failed to tell the legislators the Massachusetts bishops' position on H.3190, and neglected to inform the legislators of recent, authoritative Vatican statements on the subject - all of which created the impression among legislators that justice required the rejection of any legal definition of "marriage" as the stable union of a man and a woman.

The Web site of MassEquality, a pro-"gay marriage" group (www.massequality.org/supporters), lists Father Keenan's name under the tag line, "Support for marriage equality can be found everywhere," and provides a link to Father Keenan's April 28, 2003, testimony. Permit me to pose two questions: Will Father Hollenbach now publicly damn MassEquality for "malicious slander?" Will Father Keenan ask MassEquality to remove from its Web site what Father Hollenbach evidently regards as a malicious and slanderous misinterpretation of his testimony?

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