

Can Jesus Be Blackmailed?

Two weeks ago, just after Maine's successful reversal of the state legislature's decision to sanction same-sex marriage, MSNBC's Contessa Brewer asked me a profound question: "Would Jesus have spent \$550,000 to oppose same-sex marriage?"

The question was exactly what many secular parties had been asking in Portland, Maine, where she was speaking to me by satellite. My answer was that Jesus would have given the money to oppose same-sex marriage. My reasoning was simple: Jesus would have upheld his own teaching; refusing to be a loving, permanent enabler of a misguided local government. I mentioned in the interview that Washington, D.C. was struggling with the same question.

Since the interview, the Catholic Archdiocese of Washington gave notice to the D.C. City Council that if it approves the currently proposed same-sex marriage legislation, there will be dire consequences for the city. D.C.'s same-sex marriage bill undoubtedly will be passed next month. Although the bill does not require religious organizations to perform or make space available for same-sex weddings, it would require that religious charities obey new marriage laws. This could require the Catholic Archdiocese to extend employee benefits to same-sex married couples. Susan Gibbs, spokeswoman for the archdiocese explained, "If the city is saying in order to provide social services, you need to be secular ... that's really a problem." Gibbs noted that any religious group that receives city funds would be required to give same-sex couples healthcare benefits, open adoptions to same-sex couples, and rent church space to a support group for same-sex couples.

Catholic Charities serves 68,000 people in the city. This includes one-third of the district's homeless people who use the city-owned shelters, which are managed by the church. All in all, Catholic Charities donates \$10 million annually for

its work in the capital city. If other denominations and independent churches withdraw the help, the city could be left with a gaping hole in its social safety net.

The reaction of council members has been more about protecting their stand on same-sex marriage than the city's poor. *The Washington Post*, in a Nov. 12 interview, quoted council member Mary M. Cheh as labeling the Catholic Church as "somewhat childish." In a separate interview David A. Catania, openly gay councilman and initiator of the measure, said, "They don't represent ... an indispensable component of our social services infrastructure. If they find living under our laws so oppressive that they can no longer take city resources, the city will have to find an alternative partner to step in to fill the shoes." Other council members have accused the church of "blackmail."

The question of what the Catholic Church will do is being debated in every corner of the city. *Washington Post* reporter Petula Dvorak attempted to fan the flames of the opposition to the church's position with these remarks on Nov. 13, "By trying to play political hardball with the District, no matter how carefully they word their objection to the bill, officials at the Archdiocese of Washington and Catholic Charities are telling our city's most vulnerable people – homeless families, sick children, low-income mothers – that they are willing to throw them on the table as a bargaining chip. What the Church is doing is an uncharitable and cruel maneuver."

Nothing could be further from the truth. The city council and its cronies are so committed to making national news that they are leaving the weakest citizens of a cash-strapped city uncovered. A popular comedian I know would make the following statement concerning the city's projection of malfeasance upon the church, "Don't spit in my face and call it rain!"

Thankfully, the Catholic Church's spokespersons are much more gracious than many of the guys and gals in the pew. For

example, the Rev. Barry C. Knestout, auxiliary bishop of Washington, sent out a letter explaining the church's actions:

"Recent news reports have mistakenly claimed that the Archdiocese of Washington and its social services arm, Catholic Charities, are threatening to cease providing social services in the District of Columbia if the proposed bill to legalize same-sex marriage is passed.

"Catholic Charities is not threatening to end its services ... Catholic Charities is vowing to continue its services even if a same-sex marriage bill passes. However, the bill, as it now reads, will diminish the resources we have to do so. Why is that so? Because without a meaningful religious exemption in the bill, Catholic Charities and other similar religious providers will become ineligible for contracts, grants and licenses to continue those services.

"What we have said to the Council is this: While we are opposed to redefining marriage in the District of Columbia, if the Council moves forward to do so, we respectfully request that religious individuals and organizations be afforded protection from restrictions on their deeply held religious beliefs and that the Council preserve the ability of Catholic Charities and other providers to continue to serve the growing and unmet needs of the poor and most vulnerable residents of the District of Columbia. "

I applaud the archdiocese's courage in making the stand articulated above.

Thinking back to my interview with Brewer, I wish I had the presence of mind to mind to answer a little more like this:

People want the Roman Catholic Church and other Christian organizations to give their resources to the secular community when our doctrines on compassion and giving to the poor agree with their concepts and needs. Unfortunately, when our doctrines strongly contradict popular concepts, many

communities want to take our money and press the mute button on our teachings. The community cannot have it both ways. If you want our help, you have to receive it on our terms.

Finally, the biblical Jesus, who confronted both the political and religious hypocrites of his day, would never let himself be blackmailed into becoming a permanent agent of any corrupt government.