The annual St. Patrick’s Day Parade in New York went ahead last Monday (March 17th) just as it has for decades. Touted as America’s oldest and longest parade, nearly 200,000 people participated and perhaps a million spectators watched and cheered, most of them wearing green. The parade has no floats, just groups of people walking, from civic associations like the firemen and policemen to Irish dancers and pipe bands. They wear their uniforms or traditional costumes and proceed behind a banner identifying their organization.

This year, the parade took place without New York’s major, Bill De Blasio, and without the sponsorship of the Irish beer-maker Guinness. This is significant, for New York politicians always march in the Irish parade and Guinness has come to symbolize Ireland more than any other drink. Indeed, Guinness may be the only commercial brand immediately recognized as Irish the world over.

The reason for this decision is clear. The Ancient Order of Hibernians, the private Irish-American fraternity who put on the parade, decided to exclude openly gay participants more than two decades ago. They have retained that exclusion this year despite the increasing legal and social acceptance of gay marriage.

Both the mayor and the brewery decided that inclusion of all New Yorkers (the parade is in no way limited to Irish participants only) was paramount and that the exclusion of gay participants was blatant discrimination.

The explicit reason given for the continuing exclusion of gay marching groups is that homosexuality is against the Hibernians’ Irish Catholicism.

That is an interesting position, because the St. Patrick’s Day parade in Dublin has been inclusive for decades, letting gays and any other group to participate. A few years ago, a gay-themed float won the float competition.

So in the end, it boils down to Catholicism. The teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, like many other Christian churches and denominations, forbid homosexual practices of any sort. This is an official doctrine that goes back centuries, if not millennia.

Yet in a democracy, we also ask about the people, the individuals that make up the Catholic Church. Last year, the newly inaugurated Pope Francis authorized the first-ever official church survey of Catholic opinion on matters relating to belief, doctrine and practice.

One discovery by the Pope’s poll was that American Catholics were among the foremost supporters of gay marriage, with 54% being in favor. Other surveys observe the same phenomenon. In 2010, a Gallup poll showed that 62% of Catholics thought that homosexual relationships were “morally acceptable,” while in 2011, a Washington Post-ABC News poll found 63% of white Catholics thought same-sex marriage should be legal. Catholics favor gay rights and gay marriage more than any other religious group in this country.

So which Catholic position should the Ancient Order of Hibernians represent, that of Church doctrine or that of Church members? It seems that the Hibernians have decided to enforce Catholic doctrine on their parade, rather than listen to the people of the Church to which they belong.

This places the St. Patrick’s Day Parade in the odd position of allowing non-Catholics and non-Irish to march as themselves, but excluding Irish Catholic gays.

Yet when CBS asked Cardinal Timothy Dolan, who presides over the Catholic diocese in New York, for his view on the matter, he responded by saying, “I know that there are thousands and thousands of gay people marching in this parade….And I’m glad they are.” Perhaps next year they will be able to publically say so.

Flesher is director of UW’s Religious Studies Program. Past columns and more information about the program can be found on the Web at www.uwyo.edu/relstds. To comment on this column, visit http://religion-today.blogspot.com.