

What Our Parish Does About Gay Relationships

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(This is the second in a series of columns written in response to Pope Francis' call for input from the faithful in preparation for the Synod on the Family, October 2014. The first column dealt with the annulment process.)

Pope Francis has asked our bishops to report to Rome on what is actually happening in the parishes in regard to marriage and family life. Among the many topics to be discussed are "same-sex unions between persons who are, not infrequently, permitted to adopt children."

I think that our parish is a fairly typical middle-class, mostly white, English speaking, American parish. I also think it would also be fair to say that our approach to same sex couples, including marriage and adoption, is evolving. One might characterize our approach as public silence and private acceptance.

In public, we are silent about the fact that some of our fellow parishioners are gay, even though some people are aware of their relationships.

In private, we are accepting their relationships so long as we don't have to acknowledge them.

Such a *modus vivendi* is not really an ethical resolution to the question. In fact, it is merely a strategy for avoidance.

There seem to be two great divides in my parish over LGBT issues. One divide is generational. The other divide is personal.

The generational divide is the most obvious and clear cut but not absolute. Older people are less accepting of LGBT relationships. Younger people see no problem. In fact younger people often think that the church should move beyond mere acceptance to affirmation. The dividing line seems to be about age 50.

This generational divide is radical and serious. For some young people it determines whether or not they will remain Catholics. One young man left our church over the issue. As the older Catholics die off, the Church will find very little acceptance of its negative current position on gay relationships. We will find ourselves culturally marginalized in countries like the United States.

The personal divide is more subtle and harder to quantify. People who know someone in their family or circle of friends who is publicly gay are much more accepting of LGBT people than people who claim they don't know anyone who is gay. Of course, the fact is that everyone actually *does* know someone who is gay. They just know that their friend or family member is gay or they don't admit that they are gay.

Personal experience is important. More and more people are coming "out" as gay. More and more people will have to accept their relationships. Our younger people nearly always know someone who is "out" as gay and find it very easy to accept. This is a sea change from a generation ago.

More and more gay relationships are being discussed, even in a conservative community like ours. In the past few years, at least a dozen parents have come to me to tell me that their children are gay. They are supportive of their children. They want to know how I will respond. I always encourage them to accept and love their child.

Two of my friends who go to other parishes, left the Catholic Church when their children came out as gay. They simply could not accept a church that judged their children to be "intrinsically disordered." If someone is put in the position of choosing between their child and the Church, they will obviously and quite rightly choose their child.

The hyperbolic and harsh language of the church will have to change. It is not accurate and it is not charitable.

Our purpose as a Christian church is to remain faithful to the teaching of Jesus Christ. It is significant that Jesus had nothing to say about gay relationships. If homosexuality had been important to Jesus, he would have said something about it. After all, he told us his views on divorce and adultery and many other ethical issues. But, Jesus said nothing about it. Maybe it was not important to him.

Clearly, the most important thing to Jesus was love. The night before he died he said to his disciples, "I give you a new commandment, love one another." (John 13:34). Love is the key and the measure of his followers. So long as gay relationships are truly loving and committed, I cannot see how they are intrinsically disordered.

So how do we respond to people in same sex relationships in our parish?

First, I try to see the whole person.

This is what Pope Francis said he tries to do when he spoke with the Jesuit magazine *Civita Cattolica*. He tries to see the "whole person" since people cannot be reduced to just one aspect of their lives. Certainly, no one is defined only by their sins. As the Pope said, "So long as a person lives devoutly and seeks the face of God, who am I to judge?"

Seeing the whole person had practical consequences in pastoral life.

Our parish motto is "All Are Welcome." We really mean it. That includes LGBT people too. We welcome them to the Eucharist if they are Catholics. We baptize their children. We register the children in our activities and programs, just like any child. Welcome means welcome.

I am not the bedroom police. I do not quiz people on their private lives. I do not know who is sleeping with their boyfriend or girlfriend. I do not know who is cheating on their spouse. But one thing I know for sure, 100% of the people who come to communion at every mass in the history of the world are sinners; redeemed sinners.

In a conservative parish like mine, the presence of LGBT people is not generally a big issue, but it does exist. We have a few same sex couples in our parish. At least two couples have been married civilly. They live quietly, devoutly and humbly.

Maryland legalized gay marriage a little over a year ago. So far it has not caused even so much as ripple in our parish. We are simply not affected by it. Sacramental heterosexual marriages are not threatened by the civil law's recognition of gay marriage. We are much more threatened by "no fault" divorce which came into the law 50 years ago.

It is my view that we should get out of the civil aspects of marriage altogether, just as they do in France and Mexico and many other countries. People who want to be married in the eyes of the law should go to the court house. People who want to be married in the eyes of the Church should come to us. Church and state should be free to have their own definitions.

Welcoming gay parishioners does have some limits. We do not perform gay marriages. We teach only about sacramental marriage in our religious education classes. We do not host wedding receptions for same sex weddings.

(Our parish avoids this conflict by limiting our wedding receptions to weddings that take place in our parish church. We are not a hiring hall for weddings.)

Recently I was asked to bless the home of a gay couple. Judging from the crucifixes and holy pictures, they have a very traditional piety. Apart from the fact that they are gay, it was a pretty "Ozzie and Harriet" relationship.

In the United States gay marriage is now legal in 17 states and the District of Columbia. As a legal issue, I think the debate is all over "but the shouting." There will still be serious disagreements within society, of course. There will even be disagreements within families. Just look at the recent smack down between the Cheney sisters over gay marriage.

Civil society will still have to work out a new *modus vivendi* on such things as open housing, the wording of school text books, legal adoption policies, fringe benefits for spouses, and access to government programs. Even the Church will have to adjust. Religious liberty, like all of the rights in the Bill of Rights is a qualified right, not an absolute right.

But I don't think the sacramental definition of marriage as taught by the Church will change. We will still limited marriage to one man and one woman.

It seems to me that so long as we are free to celebrate our weddings in our own way and live our understanding, we should not be threatened by same sex marriages. Indeed, we may come to see them for what they really are, a rather conservative movement which pushes the gay community toward sexual restraint and stability. They may cut down on overall promiscuity in society. Surely that is a good thing.

I have to say frankly that I have changed my view over the past 20 years. Like Vice Presidents Dick Cheney and Joe Biden, I am "evolving." Perhaps the Catholic Church should evolve too.

When gay marriage passed by referendum in Maryland, our local bishops were notably quiet. Perhaps it was because it passed by a vote of the people and not by a court decision or legislative action. Maybe our bishops are evolving too.

Most of my parishioners are military or civil servants. They vote Republican. One man, who identifies himself as a "Tea Party" Republican, told me that the son of a friend "come out" to him as gay.

"What did you say to him?" I asked.

"I told him it was ok to be gay, just don't become a Democrat."

For more than 40 years, the language of the magisterium said that all same sex acts are "intrinsically disordered and may never be approved in any way whatever." But that certainly is not my experience as a pastor of souls.

Almost a decade ago, I got to know a gay couple in our parish. They had been together 35 years. Both are dead now. Joe was a retired school teacher. George was a retired architect.

When the George was dying of cancer, Richard came to see me, to ask if I would anoint his friend. Once at their house I realized that they were a couple. Richard was nursing George through his final illness. He had also helped George's parents.

After George died, Richard came into the parish office to plan the funeral. The rest of the family refused to come, but they did telephone to say, "We don't want it mentioned that our brother was gay and we don't want that man mentioned."

At the funeral I began the homily by saying, "I want to thank Richard for being such a great friend to George over more than 35 years. Your relationship was the defining relationship of his life and a real sign of love and friendship."

Richard was grateful. For the first time in 35 years he started coming back to the church. Three years later, it was Richard who was dying of cancer. I went to see him in the hospital in Delaware. I anointed him and gave him communion. He asked me to say his funeral mass, just as I had done for his partner.

Since neither of them was buried in our parish cemetery, I put up a plaque for them on our wall of remembrance, as is our custom. On the plaque I quoted Sirach 6:14 from the Bible. "*A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter, he who finds one finds a treasure.*"

Their relationship was not perfect, but it was certainly not intrinsically disordered.