

Same Sex Couples and Marriage

By Fr. Dave Heney, May 2012

Do same sex couples have the freedom and right to marry? Where does the Church get its teaching about marriage, and what about separation of Church and state? The debate is sometimes harsh but here are some reflections for your thoughtful review...

Many good people sincerely respect gay family members or friends, or are gay themselves and feel worthy of that same respect. We can all surely agree that good character is as evenly distributed in the gay population as in straight, and so it seems natural to let responsible and mature gay people have the same chance for happiness that the rest of society enjoys.

Our country is entering a highly emotional debate about same sex couples and marriage. The stakes are high so both sides are quite actively involved. While the debate at times gets shrill, personal, and even mean, perhaps now is a good time to thoughtfully and peacefully recall why Catholics understand marriage the way we do.

TWO SOURCES OF CATHOLICISM

We actually have *two sources* for our faith. One is simply “Observation” or what we see with our eyes observing nature. The other is “Revelation” or what we believe God has said and done, especially His self-revelation in Jesus Christ. They are complimentary sources and so cannot contradict each other. After all, God cannot go against His own creation. But more important for us, both imply we make *reasonable* and *logical* conclusions about what we see in the world and about what God says and does. (*Catechism, #1950 to #1986*)

A bedrock idea of our faith (and a favorite of Pope Benedict) is that *blind faith* is not a good thing, and can even be dangerous. An accurate and reasonable knowledge of both revelation and observation helps prevent a blind faith that can be so harmful in the world today. An openness to both is the hallmark of a wise person.

Our understanding of marriage comes from the observation of how human beings sexually fit to-

gether as well as an understanding of all revelations from God, and never from just this or that verse. We never cherry-pick verses just to advance an agenda, but rather the Church looks at all verses together, all of revelation together, and all observations together to arrive at a teaching.

The Church believes it *does not have the authority to change* what revelation and observation reveal even if it wanted to. Our personal wishes are just not involved. We can only authentically follow what nature has revealed to observation and what God has spoken in revelation.

NATURAL OBSERVATION

People have observed for years that there are many kinds of relationships. They range today from acquaintances, to buddies, to friendship, to lovers, to the engaged, and finally to marriage. Even these can be fine-tuned into more levels. Most people have an instinctive idea of what each title means and what behavior it matches. We naturally want to give each level and behavior the right name, and not call a high level relationship with a low level name. For example, deeply committed persons do not behave as just “buddies.” Titles and behaviors should match.

I think that good people today are happy to see any or all of those relationships. We are always glad to see people treat each other well, from the lowest to the highest levels of commitment, and very glad to see people with same sex orientation live lives of responsible commitment. I used to live at St. Monica’s Church in Santa Monica and that parish had a large number of same-sex couples, many of them with exceptionally deep and informed faith, excellent character, and very active in parish activities. Other parishioners were always very supportive as well.

While homosexuality has been observed throughout history (especially in Greco-Roman culture), *it is only recently that homosexual couples have asked for legal redefinition of the title and behavior of "marriage."* In California, powerful forces like the Supreme Court and citizens for or against Prop 8 have entered the debate. While each side has its extremists, there are many good hearted people on both sides and they sincerely want to do the right thing. How can we support committed same sex and heterosexual couples?

During the 2009 hearings of the California Supreme Court on the constitutionality of Prop 8, the Court indicated they also wanted to legally support commitment wherever it is, but just did not want to redefine the behavior for one relationship for another *as the people had voted*. While they earlier affirmed a "right" to marry, they certainly respected the people's right to determine what the Constitution is, and our vote to not *redefine* marriage. The Court observed that "marriage" has been, for millennia, a specific relationship of one man and one woman, and generally, but not always, about generating children.

Perhaps that is why people seek new titles for same sex couples. While "Civil Unions" and others have surfaced, the California Court is open to any name, but affirmed again that the behavior of marriage has a pre-existing meaning reserved for one man and one woman. *Their decision in May of 2009 affirmed that both Church and State actually agree. However, in 2012, a local federal judge reversed the vote of the people in Prop 8 and in 2013, the US Supreme Court let his ruling stand*

An honest observation of the First Amendment reveals it actually ensures that Church and State are not really that "separate" but will interact and inform each other in complex ways. (*People often like or dislike that interaction depending if it supports or opposes their own ideas!*) Nevertheless, affirming our Catholic belief is both the lawful exercise of our right to free speech and free exercise of religion, and a sincere search for the common good based on reason. Democracy expects citizens to speak out and so we do, especially by voting. We speak our faith as good citizens; as Catholics we

should always speak respectfully and politely, ...but as Catholics, we should always speak!

SCRIPTURAL REVELATION

Bible verses are too often used by both sides as weapons to hurt or silence others. But again, the Bible is not our only source of faith. After all, the Church had existed for several centuries before the New Testament was even assembled. Some of what Jesus revealed was written down but only some of that made it into the Bible, while other sources were just false. Catholic Bishops had to determine which authors were authentic and which were not, and finally assembled the Bible about four hundred years after Christ.

Our definition of the Bible is "The Word of God, in the words of human authors." (*Catechism #101*) While the Koran is reported to be a direct dictation by Allah to Mohammed, who did not act as an author, we believe God inspired human authors to write in their own ancient writing style to convey one message of salvation. The Bible is a cooperative event between God and imperfect human authors, just as God works today with imperfect people like us. Still, it can be hard for us today to understand a story written in an ancient writing style. We have to use considerable and informed wisdom to understand it well.

Because the Bible came from the Church, (and the Church came from Jesus) it has the authority and inspiration from the Holy Spirit to interpret its verses (*Catechism #100*). While that takes faith to accept, it kept the Church unified for centuries, as opposed to the hundreds of churches that emerged when people believed they could decide whatever they want the Bible to mean. Each new interpretation meant founding a new Church.

We do not read every verse literally but rather with reason and the common sense that acknowledges the imperfections of ancient human authors. Sometimes it takes a while for that common sense to emerge, but it is always intelligently sought to prevent false interpretations.

While all Bible verses are critical of same sex relationships, some are more blunt than others. No wonder some people use them to hurt or

silence others. But taken together, a more wise interpretation results. A thoughtful reading by the Church over many centuries of all verses in both their ancient and modern context leads to a consistent, authentic, and inspired understanding...

While same sex attraction itself is not sinful, same sex intercourse is, because only male-female intercourse is a behavior that, even for infertile couples, is naturally oriented to express both the deepest commitment, and generate new life as God designed.

CAN LOVE EVER BE WRONG?

Our faith is not about rules or laws that we either keep or break but about meeting and following the person of Jesus. Catholicism is a *relationship*, not a set of commandments. In fact, both science and our faith affirm that we are physically and psychologically designed for love. No wonder we spend so much time seeking, finding, and maintaining that love. Nothing changes our life for the better than a genuine and lasting love.

Both faith and psychology also affirm that we are oriented to choose *only what we believe is good*. But sometimes we get “the good” out of perspective, as when we choose the “good” of eating really delicious but really unhealthy food. Notice the difference. While *eating* is an authentic good, *eating the wrong food* just misses the mark. In fact, “just missing the mark” is the actual meaning of the biblical word “sin.” While even just saying the word *sin* can trigger much emotion, the Hebrew word itself comes from archers who are shooting arrows at the right target but just miss the bullseye. Wanting committed and lasting love is certainly aiming for the right target, but we can “miss the mark,” by engaging in one-night stands or infidelity. Those behaviors are “unhealthy food” and make us miss where lasting commitment can be truly found. Desire needs direction.

While we always admire a parent’s love for a child and a brother’s love for his sister and even several people’s love for each other, that love does not then become an automatic “right” for a parent to actually *marry* a child or a brother to *marry* his sister or several people to have a *group marriage*. Even love needs reasonable direction.

We should not redefine marriage as a “right” that, under the equal protection clause, would then let people redefine marriage behavior again, and marry any one or more persons that they want.

We respect everyone who desires committed and lasting love, but also humbly admit that we can at times “just miss the mark” and look for a good thing, like marriage, in the wrong place.

DOES GOD MAKE PEOPLE GAY?

Our faith actually has no opinion on the causes of same sex orientation, but we certainly observe that people are born with all kinds of physical and psychological pre-dispositions from genetic inheritance. It is quite possible that there is a genetic predisposition for same sex attraction, but genetic predispositions are common for several behaviors or psychological states.

For example, if a person is born with a genius IQ, musically gifted, physically lame, or psychologically predisposed to violence or alcoholism, our faith would never say “God made that person smart, talented, lame, violent, or alcoholic.” While genetic predispositions for IQ, music, lameness, violence, or alcoholism, are well-supported in scientific literature, our faith and science agree that genetic predispositions arise from inherited traits from parents, so the Church would never say it was a direct act of God. While we sadly acknowledge that a sociopath or alcoholic has an extra burden because of these unfortunate genetic predispositions, we would never say they have a *right* to do violence or get drunk. Genetics is not destiny or character, and deeply felt desires and wishes are not automatic “rights.”

OBSERVATION & REVELATION AGREE

While someone could be born blind, or of a specific race, or short or tall, there is nothing we naturally observe about vision, race, or height that affects anyone’s ability to have a committed relationship or engage in that intercourse that can generate a family. Having children is available to blind, short, or tall people of all races. But we naturally observe that same sex couples do not fit together sexually in a way that is naturally oriented to generating a family. This is a basic observa-

tion of our human body and not about culture, race, or sexual orientation. Both Observation and Revelation agree that, even if a couple is elderly or infertile, faithful sexual intercourse that is *naturally oriented to new life* is basic to our evolutionary success and in accord with God's design. Long before the dawn of civilization, and despite later cultural differences, that basic male-female sexual connection had become *basic behavior to that relationship called "marriage."* While gender roles in marriage have changed over time, e.g. from a patriarchal to a more equal style, gender *itself* in marriage has never changed from one man and one woman.

Our faith affirms that same sex couples can certainly enjoy a committed relationship marked with great maturity and happiness, as well as enjoy legal protections and privileges from the state, but should just not *redefine* a title and sexual behavior that has already historically and scripturally been used for one man and one woman relationships.

WHAT ABOUT FREEDOM?

Freedom is central to our faith, especially since we know its origin. It pre-dates any government, and is basic to what it means to be human as created by God. Paleontologists and others who study human evolution observe that one major feature that separates us from other animals, and selected for our evolutionary success, is the level of our free will based on reason. *We are not slaves to instinct, desires, or feelings*, but can self-consciously, rationally, and freely choose our own behavior. Freedom based in reason is a deeply human attribute.

There is a parallel verse in Genesis. As God places Adam and Eve in the Garden, He says, "You are free..." (Gen. 2:16) In that moment, Adam and Eve enjoyed what it means to have *self-consciousness* and to freely choose between alternatives, even choosing what is against their own best interest. But reason can be in error so how do we discern options? Are there choices that are always right and true?

WHAT ABOUT TRUTH?

Those who say there is no absolute truth have just affirmed something they believe is, ironically, *absolutely true!* What is absolutely true is that we cannot make our self be born. We kind of "discover" ourselves alive at some point and then face the circum-

stances in which we find ourselves. We gradually discover we are alive in this century, in this country, in this family, and in this body; none of which are our choice! Both observation and Revelation reveal we find ourselves in a world already made without our input. The truth of reality is not what we prefer but *what already is*. Truth is "out there" to be "dis-covered" as in an *un-covering*. We want to uncover what God has already revealed and observe what God has already designed in our bodies.

Therefore, the issue is not freedom but living in truth. After all, we can freely choose to believe that two plus two equals five, but that will not balance our checkbook! Freedom does not bring truth; it is the truth that will set us free (*John 8:32*). In truth, our name is not the title of our Church, but rather it is Christ's name. We are *Christians*, and so we follow Him, and not our own preferences in our own "personally designed" faith!

CONCLUSION

Observing nature and listening to God also affirms we must treat all people with love no matter what their orientation. Everyone on the planet is our brother and sister. While we don't redefine a name and behavior of one relationship with another, we can certainly affirm the good found in mature same sex couples who do not use their bodies for intercourse or in ways not naturally designed.

Our understanding of marriage arises from a reasonable observation of how we connect sexually both for the deepest of all human commitments and an openness for the generation of children, as well as a reasonable and inspired understanding of the entire body of revelation from God both in scripture and tradition.

We can be sure the debate will continue, unfortunately at times with name-calling and insults. But we can also be confident of the goodness of our legal, constitutional, scientific, and religious understanding, as well as the profound esteem and respect we have for all people of good will, even for those with whom we disagree. That is the enduring *Revelation of God and the observation of His creation* to which we always look for wisdom.

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Your thoughtful comments are welcome
