



REFLECTIONS

Among the necessary strategies for communicating what the Church teaches regarding marriage, homiletic and catechetical efforts are extremely important. To help you think about and craft good messages, we offer the following reflections on important questions at the heart of our Church's teaching. By providing answers to the most pertinent questions, it is hoped that some of the thoughts set forth below might be adapted for the homilist or teacher's purposes. Also, some Scriptural themes are mentioned where the Mass readings suggest a connection with marriage.

WHAT IS THE CHURCH'S PASTORAL CONCERN?

Among the moral issues which the Church faces in today's world, perhaps none is more emotionally charged than the issue of current attempts to redefine marriage to include persons of the same sex. It makes perfect sense that this issue would be difficult, as one's sexual attraction is among the most intimate of one's feelings. Moreover, in a culture which has become increasingly open to diverse sexual relationships, there is a growing movement in the name of tolerance to accept the claim that homosexual actions and relationships are in essence the same as that of heterosexuals and therefore should be treated as such in society and law. However, these relationships are not the same and should not be viewed as equivalent by our society. The Church then must speak to the needs of our contemporary culture regarding this issue. "Speaking the truth in love," as St. Paul says, (Ephesians 4:15) is the duty of the Church.

WHAT DOES THE CHURCH SAY ABOUT HUMAN SEXUALITY?

Catholics profess that God has revealed the objective truth of human sexuality. Our Creator knitted the truth about intimacy and affection into our very being. We are designed to love another because we are designed in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27) who is love (1 John 4:8). However, only chaste love will produce lasting joy. Chaste love is expressed in conformity with one's state in life and always honors the beloved; for instance, a married man's chaste love would be exclusively expressed with his wife. Jesus indirectly referred to this design when the Pharisees questioned him on divorce (consider Mathew 19:4-6). It was their "hardness of heart" that blocked their embrace of the truth.

Pope Paul VI wrote that the Church is "an expert in humanity." From this expertise, we understand the complementarity of the sexes. Often at odds with our larger culture, our belief is that this complementarity of the sexes is not accidental, but intrinsic to the Creator's plan, a plan to which we have experiential knowledge: that men and women are equal in dignity and value but very different from each other. This difference is physical and emotional, and as such, allows for the complementarity to form relationships which have the capacity to grow in holiness precisely because of that difference and share in the transmission of life in a way which no other relationship can. Behavior at variance with this truth will always put us at cross-purposes with ourselves and over time can harden our hearts.

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Not only is the Church “an expert,” she is also a good mother. As such, the Church knows that our intense desire for love can make our fallen human nature vulnerable to counterfeits. So, she reminds us of the grave moral evils of adultery, divorce, cohabitation, contraception, pornography, and homosexual activity. We seek love, we are designed for it, but undisciplined efforts to find love can lead us further away from the love of God the Father. This means that sexual activity at odds with the Creator’s plan will never leave us truly fulfilled or happy, but searching again and again to be made whole.

WHAT DOES THE CHURCH SAY ABOUT MARRIAGE?

(This topic may best be addressed when the Scripture readings speak of covenantal love, commitment or about declaring who we are by how we live.)

Based on God’s Word given in divine revelation, and from our discernment of the natural law, we believe that marriage creates a sacred bond between spouses and their children. We hold this to be true not only for ourselves, but for all humanity. In the context of faith, marriage is willed by the Creator from the beginning to mirror God’s love for the human family, and it was raised by Christ to the dignity of a sacrament of the New Covenant of grace, a visible and effective sign of Jesus’ sacrificial love revealed on the Cross. As such, marriage is a constant reminder of God’s love for the human race, as well as a reflection of the permanent, faithful, and fruitful bond of love between Christ and the Church (cf. Genesis 1:27, 2:22-24; Ephesians 5:31-32.) The perspective we hold on this issue is also shared by many other people of faith both Christian and otherwise (cf. Manhattan Declaration: A Call of Christian Conscience, November 20, 2009).

Marriage is also a call to holiness, existing solely between a man and a woman, who by mutual self-gift, reserved for themselves, commit to love one another and help one another grow in virtue. It is also a call to cooperate with God in the procreation and upbringing of new human lives. Marriage is the exclusive venue wherein the unimpeded procreative power of the sexual faculty is to be exercised. This openness to procreation, coupled with fidelity and permanence in married life, expresses the truth of spousal love. There are no substitutes for these foundational, defining aspects of married life.

WHAT IS THE CHURCH’S PURPOSE IN THIS DEBATE?

(This topic may best be addressed when the Scripture readings speak of being misunderstood or alienated.)

The Church desires to stand as a witness in the midst of our culture: not with arrogance or anger, but with a deep desire to lead all to the most profound truths concerning human existence. Again, may we never desire to do anything less or more than what St. Paul commands: speak the truth in love.

Unfortunately, those who challenge the equating of relationships between persons of the same sex with marriage are often immediately dismissed as bigoted, old-fashioned, or worse. It is as if the attempt to understand the dignity and purpose of human sexuality and marriage were a personal attack on the dignity of those who do not agree. It should be remembered that the Church has not

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initiated some type of attack on individuals, but rather seeks to show that what God has revealed about human sexuality is for our good, and though not always easy to live, it is the only true way to fulfillment and happiness. This conflict is not new to Christians as it was also familiar to Christ:

The Pharisees wanted to trap Jesus. They brought him a woman who had been caught in adultery, and stood her alone in front of a crowd. They told Jesus that she was a sinner, and that she should be stoned. They waited for him to trip up—to ignore her sinfulness, or to treat her contemptuously. Either could be used against him.

Jesus did neither. He offered her words of compassion and words of truth. He sent away her persecutors and spoke to her in love. But he also told her the truth. He recognized her sinfulness. As she left him, Jesus told her, “Go, and sin no more.” (John 8:11)

In a subsequent encounter, Jesus spoke again to the Pharisees. His words there were clear: “You will know the truth and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32).

Throughout the Gospel, Jesus united truth and love in his being and his preaching. By example and by precept, he instructs us, his disciples, to be faithful to him in this way, for the good of our own souls and so that we might bring understanding to others. In imitating Jesus’ commitment to telling the truth and doing so in love, we can enjoy what St. Paul called “the peace that passes understanding” (Philippians 4:7).

HOW ARE PERSONS WITH SAME-SEX ATTRACTIONS TO BE TREATED?

(This topic should be addressed whenever the broader debate is engaged.)

The Church’s teaching on human sexuality is in no way an attack on the dignity and worth of people who experience same-sex attraction. We must treat those who experience same-sex attractions with respect on account of their inherent dignity. All people are made in God’s image, and all are our brothers and sisters for whom Christ died. All baptized Christians are adopted sons and daughters of God, regardless of their sexual attractions. It is sinful to belittle or dismiss any person, regardless of any characteristic of their lives: among numerous places in magisterial teaching see, for example, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s *Persona Humana*.

Moreover, the Church teaches an essential distinction between having an orientation or inclination toward same-sex activity, and freely choosing to engage in homosexual acts. Our culture assumes orientation necessarily results in acts. The Church, by contrast, makes a crucial distinction. Even if a person feels he or she can’t help who he or she is attracted to, the attraction itself is not a sin. Only acting in accord with it is sinful. All of us struggle with many temptations, and we all pray for strength.

At the same time, as Jesus demonstrated to the Pharisees, the adherence to the revealed truth about our lives and how they are to be lived, demands that we not simply “tolerate” others but actually attempt to be a witness for those things in our lives which will help bring us fulfillment and peace.

