

Equal in Dignity and In Responsibility: A Pastoral Consideration of Ministering to those with Same Sex Attraction

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The very public emergence of those among us with same sex attraction and other self-described orientations presents many pastoral challenges to the Church. To a large degree the much of this public emergence has taken up the premise that though with same sex attraction have been victims of unjust discrimination and unequal treatment. The charge of inequality and injustice are also laid at the feet of the Church.

In this article I would like to argue that the Church does not, in terms of her teachings and expectations, treat those with same sex attraction unfairly. To the contrary, we insist on one standard for every person, which is that we all live chastely according to our state in life. For a married man and woman this means that they be faithful to one another in body, mind and heart. For the unmarried living chastely means refraining from all genital sexual activity, immodest touching and lustful thinking rooted in pornography, and masturbation. There are no exceptions to this standard, rooted in a biblical vision and natural law. This one standard is just and equitable in that it binds all and blesses all. That some with same sex attraction cannot marry some one they are sexually attracted to is unfortunate (there are many unfortunate factors in everyone's life), but there are many who do not have same sex attractions who also for many reasons are not married and may never marry.

As a pastoral stance, in ministering to those with same sex attraction and addressing our culture, it seems wise that the Church should emphasize that the equanimity of our teaching, since allegations of unfairness and discrimination are pervasive. We have one standard and one teaching that is for all and applies to all, without exception. We are equal in dignity and responsibility.

This stance is also helpful in terms of how we handle the increasingly complex situations presented to us. Simply put, we should handle these situations in just the same way that we handle irregular situations presented to us from heterosexual persons. One standard exists, and must be applied to all. We ought learn to see these complex situations more simply and applies our norms, simply and equitably to those who present them to us. They are equal in dignity and equal in responsibility.

Below we can look to four pastoral examples to apply this principal. But first we do well to examine a couple of things in the culture that make our task of demonstrating our equanimity more difficult.

The first matter is the rather reductionist notion of reducing one's identity to sexual attraction.

Sexuality is an important component of who we are, but surely it is not the only component and not the most significant. Yet in a hyper-sexualized culture there are increasing numbers who want their sexual attraction to be front and center, and who see this matter as the almost the sole way they want to be understood. Never mind that they may like classical music, be a car mechanic or even a child of God. Many want to be known first and foremost as "gay" and be identified with a behavior that both scripture and human traditional see as deeply problematic, and sinful.

I leave it to other authors here to develop the case for why it is problematic and sinful, but the main point here is that when a person identifies sexual orientation as their main and crucial identity, then they are going to take very personally the rejection of the behavior with which they identify. And this presents special challenges to us who would like to say we reject the sin, but not the sinner.

But all the more reason that we in the Church must emphasize the equanimity of our

teaching and strive to ensure that our policies reflect what we teach, that all are equal in dignity and responsibility, all are called to live with the one chaste standard articulated in Scripture and Tradition.

The second matter is the rapid and revolutionary quality of the issue. Less than ten years ago our current president spoke against so called “Gay marriage” and suffered no political harm, and may even have benefitted from his stance. Even in a generally liberal state such as California, a bill to approve marriage for same-sex couples was struck down in 2008. Since that time dramatic changes in the perception of those with same-sex attraction and attitudes toward their unions being recognized as “marriages” have change in a way that can only be called stunning. Almost overnight demands, even coupled with threats of legal sanctions, are directed at the Church to conform and regularize approval at every level for same-sex activity, marriages, and so forth.

Here is the special challenge presented by issues related to same-sex attraction: its sudden and “take no prisoners” appearance on the scene. The message seems to be: “Comply quickly or experience condemnation even legal action and the impression that you are unkind, intolerant and “homophobic.”

This rapid change of climate, is important to acknowledge because it also helps explain why, to some extent what I argue should be our simple, equal standard for everyone is not up and running in every parish or diocese. There are many complicated rules and exceptions that seem to set up which are interpreted as either targeting those with same sex attraction unfairly, or bending over backward to make exceptions for them in a way that compromises the moral requirements of Scripture and Tradition.

By contrast, other matters such as single motherhood, divorce and remarriage and cohabitation, “common” sins among heterosexuals, showed up more subtly and gradually over several decades. First there was one “single mother” and we handled it quietly. Then two, three and dozens, and so on, but over time, in decades. The awareness that we have a problem here was (sadly) a gradual process. The same can be said for cohabiting couples and divorce and remarriage. In these cases, the effects extended over a longer time and sadly inoculated us to the fact that we had a real problem on our hands.

Though the charge of some with same-sex attraction that when they appeared on the scene we suddenly discovered we were in a crisis is a fundamentally unfair accusation, I do understand the climate which has given rise to this charge. For decades now “divorce and remarriage” has gone on with relative silence from Catholic pulpits. Cohabitation, fornication, contraception and now Internet porn are seldom the subject of sermons or statements. But enter “gay marriage” and suddenly it would seem the hierarchy has awakened and statements, court briefs and other concerns abound. The “Gay” community is cynical that our level of outrage is consistent across these issues. Fifty years of heterosexual misbehavior and redefining of marriage (e.g. no-fault divorce and contraception) have been ignored. But the sleeping giant of the Church awakes when homosexual misbehavior appears. Or so the charge goes.

There are priests and bishops who have consistently preached against all sexual misconduct and spoke the complex issues of divorce. But to some degree our pulpits have been too silent.

But here again, our stance cannot be to deepen our silence, but to proclaim without ambiguity the one chaste standard that binds and blesses us all. Bishops, priests and Deacons who preach on issues related to same-sex attraction must carefully present our teaching as a part of whole. I do not think I have ever preached or taught on the sinfulness of homosexual acts

without also laying out the sinfulness of fornication and adultery. No one is or should be singled out. The point is that there is one standard.

If we have been sleepy and silent, shame on us. But the task before us now is to be clear, consistent and charitable announcing equal dignity and equal responsibility to follow the one standard for sexuality and marriage given to us all by God.

Some in the Church will also argue, with proper concern, that homosexual acts are not only sins against purity but they are also sins contrary to nature (St. Paul calls them “paraphysin” (Rom 1:26-27) and that Scripture consigns them to the category of sins that cry to heaven for vengeance (cf Gen 17:20-21). And this is true, and surely valid in a theological discussion.

But from a pastoral point of view, fornication, adultery, and homosexual acts are all serious violations against purity and are all objectively mortal. None of these acts can be reconciled with a proper understanding and living of the Catholic and Christian faith. Pastorally and practically when such situations arise in our parishes and schools, the determinations and decisions we make about giving sacraments, accepting children in our schools, employment issues etc., are going to be handled in a similar manner.

This, I would argue, is key going forward. We must do a better job in presenting our objections to issues related to same-sex attraction in the light of our received teachings on sexuality which bind and bless everyone equally. There are not different standards for homosexual and heterosexual persons, neither are there different versions of human nature at work. Hence sexuality has a proper purpose and place and this vision, given to us by God and Natural Law applies to all of us, without exception.

Having set forth a principal of equality and simplicity, and having acknowledged the difficulties of the current scene, Lets look at some real-life situations and see how our norms and teachings, if applied properly are fair, equitable and respectful of all involved.

Scenario 1: Two men present an infant they have adopted for baptism. These men are living in a same-sex relationship and have had what they call their “marriage” recognized as such by the State. They claim to be parishioners and the pastor does recognize them, though he never knew of their relationship, living arrangements or the existence of their civil “marriage” license. In the baptism of infants and young children there is to be some well-founded hope that the Child will be raised in the Catholic faith (cf Canon 868.2). This highly irregular situation makes the pastor wonder as to the proper course of action.

Reply: In a fairly straightforward way, this scenario can be handled like a cohabiting heterosexual couple, or a couple in an invalid marriage who present a child for baptism. When irregularities exist in the presenting family, the pastor must balance the need of the child for baptism (which is a fundamental need), with the likelihood of them being raised in the faith, given the irregularities.

Some irregularities can be easily resolved, such as validating a marriage. But others cannot. With cohabiting couples, some are heading for marriage, but for others marriage is not in the near future and perhaps unlikely at all. Sometimes the faith of heterosexual couples is vigorous despite the irregularities, at other times their faith is tepid and their practice of the faith tangential.

Add to this scene the high frequency of single mothers who present children for baptism. Some have had a one-time fall, others are prone to promiscuous or serial relationships that are unhealthy; some are actively practicing their faith, many are not.

And yet, here is a child in need of baptism. Given the urgent need for baptism, the historical tendency of the Church has been to baptize even the children of prostitutes. The well founded hope that children will be raised in the faith has more often been understood to mean even a glimmer of hope. The fact is, whatever the irregular situation that exists, the parent(s) are coming to the Church and requesting baptism. There is *some* faith.

Some pastors are far more restrictive in their interpretation, but the usual and historical stance has been to be generous in seeing a well-founded hope, given the necessity of baptism for salvation.

My own approach in cases of irregularities among “heterosexuals” is to use moments like this both a teachable moment, a call to repentance, and also to summon the parent(s) to faith. I don’t just stay silently “nice.” I exhort that cohabiting couples should separate if reasonable (and not deleterious to the child). They should prepare to marry if this is advisable, and most certainly stop fornicating right away. Invalid marriages should be validated. Those who are not coming to Mass must do so faithfully starting right away.

I also instruct them that they are going to make a promise to God, (and I read it from the baptismal rite) to raise these children in the faith. This means they cannot go on living in a way at odds with that faith. I ask them to soberly consider if they are really ready to make this promise (which includes working to eliminate the irregularities). If they are not, they should delay the baptism since making such promises are very solemn. To fail to follow through on such a promise makes it difficult to imagine how they can avoid being sentenced to hell. I am clear with them on this.

I would not change a thing with a same-sex couple. It is unlikely that I would refuse to baptize the child. However I would make it clear that they too have a decision to make in terms of the promise they will make to God. If they are going to raise this child in the Catholic faith, like any cohabiting couple, they need to stop having sexual intimacy, possibly separate altogether, and most certainly never teach the child that homosexual acts are anything other than sinful, as God’s word teaches. If they are not able to make these changes and begin to conform to Catholic teaching, which their promise in the baptismal rite indicates, I recommend they delay the baptism until they are. But the decision is theirs.

In cases where baptisms involving any of the irregular situations described above go forward, I recommend that every parish handle them discretely. In other words, celebrate them more privately, at times other than masses or regularly scheduled baptisms. They ought not to be done alongside baptisms where properly married parents present children. If such a practice has developed, it should be discontinued so that further scandal and desensitization to irregularity is avoided. The baptism of a child presented by a same-sex couple at Mass or alongside proper situations would shock most congregations. And while unmarried heterosexual parents at baptisms are less obviously visible (and so shock less), these sorts of baptism too ought to be done more discretely.

This may mean more work for clergy, but equanimity requires it more going forward if we are to assert, as I think we ought, that those with same-sex attraction are treated with equanimity.

Scenario 2: A teacher in the parish school who has been teaching for years and who is very popular has now begun living with a same sex partner. A reliable parishioner has reported the situation to the pastor. How should the pastor deal with this situation?

Reply: No pastor should ever handle such a situation alone. Consultation with the diocese and legal staff are important in any decision that results in the termination of employment. Even apart from matters related to same-sex attraction, hiring and “firing” have become highly litigious matters. Clearly evidence, including an interview with the teacher must be assembled. Policies and procedures will have to be carefully followed.

There are also different expectations for those in roles of teaching and ministry, and other staff such as maintenance employees. Given the complexities, a pastor or principal who foresees a possible termination of employment must never do this alone at any stage, the diocese should be consulted.

However, from a moral standpoint, how is the situation described above different from a teacher openly living together with her boyfriend? We reasonably expect the teachers in our Catholic schools not to live in open opposition to the teaching of the Church. If perchance a teacher has disagreement with our teachings, we cannot force them to believe, but we can rightly insist that they remain discrete and not openly support or do what the Church teaches against. This applies to everyone, and all our doctrinal teachings equally. So again, equality is essential. The standard is no different for heterosexual or homosexual persons.

Several major dioceses in this country have already undertaken measures to spell out reasonable norms and apply them equally to all teachers. Such norms have also been carefully crafted to avoid legal challenges and to respect the civil and constitutional rites of employees, even as the Church legitimately seeks to ensure that our schools hand on the faith in word and deed.

Scenario 3: A known “lesbian couple” want to enroll their adopted daughter in kindergarten at the parish elementary school. The principal approaches the pastor for guidance. Perhaps this will good for the child to be in be in a religious environment where the Church’s teachings are to be upheld for marriage and the family. But perhaps too, it could cause harm for the other children who would be exposed to a confusing situation that might imply approval.

Reply: Here too no pastor or principal should ever handle this alone. And proper and equitable response is going to require a diocesan-level decision that is followed in all our schools. Otherwise different schools with different policies convey that the teaching is really up for grabs or just personal opinion.

A recent situation just like this occurred in a large archdiocese in this country. The diocese had reason to suspect that homosexual activists may have orchestrated this as a “set up” since three same sex couples all applied at once, in three different schools.

The diocese therefore convened a panel of pastors, principals, legal experts and others to consider the applications and develop a response to the three applications and a policy going forward.

The essential solution was to place the matter squarely in the court of applicants. Applications were enhanced for every school to indicate that, in enrolling their children in Catholic Schools, parents were expected to live in a way that did not express opposition with Catholic moral teaching. Currently they are asked to sign a statement certifying that they can meet this requirement. This puts the onus on the applicant and does not require principals and pastors to go down some sort of checklist that, no matter how long it is, would be called selective and have each word parsed.

Again, everyone is treated equally: Equal in dignity, equal in responsibility.

Scenario 4: A student preparing for Confirmation has just publicly supported same sex marriage.

After on-going discussions, his pastor advised him he is not ready to receive the Sacrament and should delay it until he can resolve his differences with the Church. What is more the student intends to make public the whole intervention by his pastor, according to his side of the story.

Reply: Confirmation is a Sacrament of Initiation given by the Lord to strengthen one in the proclamation of the Faith. As such, those who are confirmed publicly affirm the Creed and by extension whatever truths the Catholic Church believes, teaches and proclaims to be revealed by God. The public support of same sex marriage is directly contrary to biblical and Church teaching. Hence, the student would, in effect, publicly lie were he to proceed with the Rite of the Sacrament of Confirmation. Nothing is being denied the student. He is excluding himself from being able to receive it since he does not share the faith he seeks to be confirmed in. Further, unlike baptism, Confirmation is not necessary for salvation.

The student is free to make public his side of the story and what the pastor said. The pastor is not free to report what the student said in the meeting, but he can issue a generally worded statement about what confirmation is (and is not), and what the recitation of the Creed means in the context of the celebration of the Sacrament.

This might also allow the pastor to teach the congregation that the reception of Holy Communion each Sunday also involves an affirmation of communion with the Church, and her doctrinal and moral teachings.

So the priest can use this a teaching moment but would be advised to not allow the matter to be reduced to the questions surrounding same sex attraction. Instead this can permit him to apply the principal of equality and remind all Catholics to seek communion with the Church on all matters, doctrinal, and moral.

So again, here is a clear application of the principle of equanimity where Church teaching on matters related to same sex attraction are seen in the light of wider teaching which applies to all.

In summary, though a new landscape confronts us, our teachings have not changed and continue to apply to all, equally. We do not single out certain groups or acts for special condemnation or praise. No one is exempt or exists in special categories in such matters of our moral teaching on human sexuality and the call to purity. There is one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism. It applies to us all; it binds us all, it blesses us all. We stand before God as equal, and we all receive the grace to be holy whatever temptations particularly assail us, or sinful attractions draw us. We are equal in dignity and equal in responsibility.