

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

September 30, 2010 at 9:14am

Nature vs. nurture

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

I was always told that you're not supposed to discuss religion or politics in polite company. That was before gay marriage became the item du jour.

Polls indicate about half the US population favors legal protections for same-sex couples. Gay marriage is another story. Not so many support it.

Gay marriage proponents want to redefine a word: marriage, and by so doing grab hold of the hundreds of legal protections and financial incentives to marriage the old fashioned way.

You can be sure it will end up at the Supreme Court.

Then there's "don't ask, don't tell", which skirts the military's longstanding ban on homosexual activity. The current Uniform Code of Military Justice defines sodomy as "unnatural carnal copulation with another person of the same or opposite sex or with an animal."

That will probably go before the Court too. So the question is: what's "natural" or "unnatural"? That, in turns, leads to a more overarching question: Is homosexuality a status or a choice?

Some thinkers, including Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, seem to reason that homosexuality is an inborn status. Catholicism -- and, indeed most religions -- teach that while homosexuality exists, homosexual activity is a "disordered" choice against the laws of nature.

So what?

Well, look at it this way. If homosexuality is a status rooted in biology, then homosexuals, like left-

handed people, act according to nature. If homosexuality is a choice rooted in behavioral factors, then homosexuals act against nature. And here the argument splits. Are we talking about civil rights or morality? In terms of civil rights, individuals deserve and are afforded protections for both status (say, skin color) and choice (for example, religious affiliation).

In terms of morality, status is neutral, while choice has implications and consequences.

Catholicism argues that homosexuals deserve legal protections, but not because homosexuality is a status. Catholicism says homosexual activity is a choice. So while bishops support non-discrimination policies, they won't agree that homosexuals are protected because of their genetic makeup.

Catholic thinkers have grappled with this question for ages. Creighton University professors Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler are the latest voices on the Catholic circuit. Their 2008 book, *The Sexual Person*, just earned a rebuke from the U.S. bishops' doctrine committee.

Advertisement

Salzman and Lawler's dense academic argument turns traditional Catholic teaching on natural law on its head. They redefine natural law, saying "nature" is personal and individual, and that sexual activity need not be directed at procreation (contrary to what the Catholic Church has always said).

Salzman and Lawler argue that what is "natural" for a heterosexual is not "natural" for a homosexual, and therefore homosexuals and heterosexuals must act in accord with their personal "natures."

In other words, if it's "natural" for a homosexual to perform homosexual acts, then -- for that person -- heterosexual acts would be "unnatural" and immoral. For the two professors, homosexual activity is only immoral for the heterosexual acting against his or her nature.

Bottom line: Salzman and Lawler are arguing that homosexuality is a status, not a behavioral choice. If that's the case, then everyone -- including the Catholic Church -- should line up in support of an entire rainbow of gay-related arguments and ideas.

Taken to their logical conclusion, Salzman and Lawler's arguments would mean that Catholic moral teaching must do a complete about-face and disconnect sex from marriage -- even from procreation -- altogether.

But the only evidence the professors give is from behavior, not genetics. As far as civil rights is concerned, I'm on the gay side, no matter whether status or choice. As far as morality is concerned, I don't think Salzman and Lawler have proved their point.

(Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University and author of several books in Catholic Studies.)

Editor's Note: We can send you an e-mail alert every time Phyllis Zagano's column, "Just Catholic," is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: **E-mail alert sign-up**. If you already receive e-mail alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add "Phyllis Zagano" to your list.

Source URL (retrieved on 08/20/2017 - 03:05): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/just-catholic/nature-vs-nurture>

Links:

[1] <https://www.ncronline.org/donate?clickSource=article-end>