

More on Catholic Attitudes on Gay Marriage

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 25, 2011 | Distinctly Catholic

Earlier this week, [I reported on a new survey](#) [1] of polling data about Catholic attitudes towards gay and lesbian issues conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute. The key finding of that survey was that Catholics are more supportive of gay rights than other Christians, although there remains some ambivalence about the specific issue of gay marriage.

It was unsurprising that some people would greet these findings with all the acumen of an ostrich. Bill Donohue of the Catholic League for Civil Rights [issued a press release](#) [2] that claimed, among other things, that "Catholics who are Catholic in name only can be expected to entertain a secular vision of morality, i.e., one that prizes radical autonomy. Those who are serious about their religion look to more authoritative sources for guidance." He cited the findings in the poll which indicated that those Catholics who attend Mass more regularly are less likely to support gay marriage. "In other words, there is a positive correlation between Mass attendance and adherence to the Church's teachings."

Of course, Donohue goes on to claim that polls are not good indicators of public sentiment, even though he just used the poll to fortify his position. Data is data Mr. Donohue. A poll is either a good poll or not. To say, as he does, that he agrees with those findings that support his position but the rest can be dismissed is not what normally passes for intellectual rigor.

Such intellectual rigor would also require that we acknowledge what sociologists have long known: Those who attend religious services more regularly tend to be older and support for gay rights tracks age closely. The younger a person is — whether they are Catholic, or Evangelical, or if they claim no religious affiliation — the more likely they are to support gay rights including gay marriage.

The survey indicated that many Catholics support civil unions instead of same sex marriages. If you lump them with those who support gay marriage, a majority of Catholics support it. If you lump them with those who oppose gay marriage specifically, most Catholics oppose gay marriage. But, the pollsters went deeper and asked if people's attitudes towards gay marriage would change if they understood gay marriage to be a strictly civil affair, "like you get at city hall." When framed that way, a clear majority of Catholics, 71%, support gay marriage, a 28% increase. This would indicate that there would be widespread support for conscience protections for the Church to ensure that they not be forced to perform gay marriages.

The Church has done a very bad job defending its position in the public realm. Recently in Maryland, those state senators who had been on the fence on this issue said that what made them decide to support a gay marriage bill in the legislature was the testimony of those who oppose gay marriage: They were so hostile, dismissive and bigoted in their testimony, those state senators saw the issue not as a matter of society deciding it was a good thing to privilege traditional marriage but as an instance of bigotry. The state senators said they did not want to be associated with such bigotry.

On the press call during which the survey was released, Professor Stephen Schneck, director of the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies at Catholic University, contrasted the Church's response to liberalized

divorce laws with the Church's response to Roe v. Wade. In the first instance, the Church recognized the futility of the fight and focused mainly on teaching its own about why divorce was not permitted. On abortion, the Church recognized that the law must change. Today, on the issue of gay marriage, the Church must decide which approach it wants to take. It can continue to focus on the laws, and it will lose, or it can focus on teaching its own co-religionists about the value of traditional marriage. As I have said to any one who asks, it seems that we lost the battle for traditional marriage in the ambient culture when we acquiesced in liberal divorce laws. Divorce remains a much greater threat to traditional marriage than any legal recognition of same sex unions.

Americans, and Catholic Americans, are ambivalent on the issue of gay marriage. Our sense of fair play demands that lifelong partners be allowed to visit each other in the hospital, bequeath property to each other without penalty, etc. Our concern for the culture requires that we not redefine such a central institution in our society without thinking about the consequences. When the issue first arose on the national stage after the Massachusetts State Supreme Court ruled in favor of gay marriage in 2004, I voiced a different concern than most. Of course, marriage has changed through the ages: Before Trent, there were no nuptial Masses, for example. But, changes in central social and cultural institutions usually happen slowly, over time. There was something disturbing, even Orwellian, about the idea that a court could change the meaning of a word. My concern was not widely shared.

The Catholic Church should not bury its head in the sand as Donohue seems to want it to do. Our approach to this issue, like our approach to many issues in this increasingly secular culture, must be to foster what Pope Benedict has called "creative minorities" in which we live what we believe and hope the beauty of our lives will attract others. Allowing ourselves to be lumped with anti-gay bigots is not the answer. We must ask ourselves: Why do others not see the beauty of a lifelong marital commitment? Why do others not see Christ as a part of their marriage? And, why should we be in the business of trying to prevent gays and lesbians from achieving some level of legal stability and protection for their unions? These are not easy questions, even though the loudest voices on both sides of the issue treat them, if they treat them at all, as easily answered.

A final note. Some commentators have suggested that it is better to ignore Mr. Donohue. I fear that allowing his broadsides to go unquestioned will leave the impression that he speaks for Catholics. That is the very essence of cultural disaster. People should be able to Google "gay marriage" and "Catholics" and find opinions other than his own. In the public square, we must answer critics, not ignore them.

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[1] <http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/new-report-catholic-attitudes-towards-lgbt-issues>

[2] <http://www.catholicleague.org/release.php?id=2111>