

## Editorial: Catholics face an arduous evolution on marriage

NCR Editorial Staff | May. 23, 2012

Editorial

The opening sentence on our news story about President Barack Obama's endorsement of same-sex marriage is: "Americans' position on same-sex marriage is like their president's: It's evolving." This is especially true for Catholic Americans, and indicators so far suggest it won't be a smooth evolution.

Shortly after Obama's announcement, New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the president's comments "are deeply saddening."

The day before, North Carolina became the 31st state to ban same-sex marriage with a constitutional amendment. Religious groups were instrumental in the victory, organizers said, and the leadership of the Catholic church was prominent.

North Carolina Bishops Peter J. Jugis of Charlotte and Michael F. Burbidge of Raleigh had campaigned for the amendment, but were at the Vatican for their *ad limina* visits on the day of the vote. In his homily at a Mass at the altar of the tomb of Blessed John XXIII in St. Peter's Basilica May 8, Jugis said he and Burbidge had endured scorn for their efforts to uphold church teaching on marriage. It was a cross worth bearing, he said, "to be courageous in witnessing to the Gospel." He said a fellow bishop had told him to "Wear [the scorn] as a badge of honor."

The official teaching of the church is that marriage is only between one man and one woman, any sexual activity outside of marriage is sinful, and all sex acts must have the potential to create life. If bishops are willing to wear scorn as a badge of honor in defense of this teaching, those of us who would hope for a more inclusive understanding of sexuality in human relationships and a broader understanding of the sanctity of committed relations know that the evolution of church teaching will be arduous.

This is why we owe gratitude to Vice President Joe Biden, a Catholic, for pushing this topic to the fore. Whether Biden's profession that he is "absolutely comfortable" with same-sex couples marrying was a gaffe or brilliant campaign strategy will take some time to discern. Biden and Obama deserve high marks for courage in following their convictions when the political result is uncertain. Obama isn't likely to gain or lose significant numbers of voters over this issue. But he faces significant risk of pushing conservatives who may have sat out this election into the camp of his presumptive Republican rival Mitt Romney.

Romney has voiced opposition to gay marriage, predictably so because he needs to shore up support in the evangelical Christian base of his party. The Republican Party's platform has contained a plank supporting a federal constitutional amendment to define marriage as between one man and one woman, but not many Republicans are touting that plank.

The reason for this may lie in a CBS News/*New York Times* poll taken after Obama's announcement. The survey found that 46 percent of Republicans support legal recognition of same-sex couples. In that cohort might be Romney, because though he advocates for "traditional" marriage, he is also on record supporting domestic

partnership laws, perhaps including child adoption rights for same-sex couples. Republicans, as much as Democrats, want to stay in the mainstream of American public opinion on this issue.

And that brings us back to Catholics. Despite the official teaching of the church, most Catholics are like Joe Biden: "I just think that the good news is that as more and more Americans come to understand what this is all about is a simple proposition. Who do you love? Who do you love?" Biden said on "Meet the Press" May 6. "And will you be loyal to the person you love? And that's what people are finding out is what, what all marriages, at their root, are about. Whether they're marriages of lesbians or gay men or heterosexuals."

Biden, like so many Catholics, has come to accept same-sex relationships because we have seen our friends, our sons, our daughters, our siblings and our parents living in committed same-sex relationships. It is the lived experience that a same-sex relationship can be as nurturing and life-giving as the best heterosexual relationships that leads us to question the official teaching and open ourselves to new ways of thinking about relationships.

From that lived experience we add a bit of study and learn deeper truths. For example, serious scholarship refutes the idea that marriage is a sacrament instituted by Christ. For the first Christian millennium marriage was a strictly civil arrangement. Franciscan Fr. Kenan Osborne, to take one example, writes in his *Sacramental Theology*, "It was only about the time of Peter of Lombard (ca. 1100-1160) that marriage was accepted as a sacrament of the Church." Prior to that time there was strong resistance by theologians and bishops.

Scriptural arguments for marriage being between one man and one woman are problematic. Though there are six verses in the Bible that address "a man lying with another man," there are dozens of laws regarding heterosexual relationships that Christians do not follow. Many patriarchs in the Hebrew Scriptures had multiple wives as well as concubines. Jesus never addresses homosexuality in the Gospels.

Unlike Protestantism, Catholicism is not a tradition that relies solely on Scripture as a source for its doctrine. Current church teaching is that Christian marriage has two equal purposes: procreation and a loving partnership that is itself life-giving for the couple and for the community. Unfortunately, a misguided, mechanistic reading of natural law theory has become the church's defense of marriage, and procreation has become the litmus test for a valid marriage, which leaves out not only gay partnerships, but infertile couples and couples who choose not to have children.

What then is a good Catholic to believe? What is a good Catholic to do about this issue?

Probably the first and easiest action is to follow the advice of Nicholas P. Cafardi, a civil and canon lawyer and a professor at Duquesne University School of Law in Pittsburgh. Last year in *NCR* (see "Civil marriage is for Caesar to decide, not the church" on the *NCR* website at [NCRonline.org/node/25500](http://NCRonline.org/node/25500)), Cafardi wrote that the church should stop trying to define civil marriage: "How civil society defines civil marriage simply is not ours to dictate, whether from force or fear." This offers an excellent guide to the basic civil rights issues surrounding same-sex marriage.

The next steps will not be so easy. We will have to pray and work for the conversion of hearts among Catholics who feel "deeply saddened" by the committed, same-sex relationships that we see are true expressions and "dare we say it" outward signs of God's grace.

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