

Why the Church Should Fight Anti-Gay Bigotry

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 4, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Last week, I called attention to, but did not write about, [an important article by former Ambassador Thomas Melady and the Reverend Richard Cizik](#) [1], a prominent evangelical leader. The two men wrote about the need for Christians to oppose efforts in Uganda to criminalize homosexuality, including life-time prison sentences and even death as penalties in certain cases. I think Melady's and Cizik's article is very important.

Many gay men and women see the Christian Church as unjust and bigoted towards them. For purposes of this article, I will only consider the situation of the Catholic Church. Just today, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in publishing its notice about Sr. Margaret Farley's book on sexual ethics, reaffirmed the teaching that: "Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered. They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved." It is not difficult to see how gay men and women could find these words hurtful and even demeaning, even though the CDF precedes this bit about "intrinsically disordered" by affirming the fact that the Church also teaches gay men and women "must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided."

I should like to see the Catholic Church, and the broader Christian community, do more to focus on the teaching about "respect, compassion and sensitivity" and think Melady's and Cizik's article does this. It does not ask the Church's leaders to do something they do not think they could, i.e., change the Church's teaching. It does not ask the Church to reverse its views on marriage. Instead, the call to oppose unjust discrimination against gays in Uganda asks the Church to do what it can.

In the event, opposing unjust discrimination against gays in Uganda is not only something the Church can do, but something it should do. I do not believe that the hierarchy of the Catholic Church is bigoted against gays. But, I do believe that when one takes public policy positions that are the same as those espoused by bigots, it is incumbent upon one to explain why and how one's positions comes not from bigotry but from elsewhere. This need was brought home to me during the early 2010 debate between Leon Wieseltier and Andrew Sullivan. Wieseltier did not accuse Sullivan of being an anti-Semite but he did charge him with indulging classically anti-Semitic tropes and asked, I think responsibly, if these tropes are not rooted in anti-Semitism, explain how and why they are not? It was a fair question.

It is a question the Catholic Church must ask and answer. Obviously, as in the CDF statement issued this morning, the Church's views about homosexuality are a consequence not only of this or that biblical prohibition "we all eat shrimp and pork chops now - but primarily as a result of the Church's teachings about marriage. Because the Church believes that the human sexual faculty should only be expressed in the marital union, and only when the conjugal act is open to the possibility of procreation, homosexuality, like pre-marital heterosexual sex, or self-pleasuring, falls outside the bounds of licit sexual expression. Let us set aside whatever you or I may think of that view of human sexuality for the present. The key here is whether or not the Church's view is

necessarily evidence of anti-gay bigotry.

Certainly, the Church's ideas about marriage have changed over time. In the Hebrew Scriptures, we encounter plural marriage. In the New Testament, Jesus was keen to be more strict, not less so, about the circumstances in which divorce could be contemplated. In the Middle Ages, theologians debated the degrees of consanguinity between the betrothed that would require a dispensation and, as well, the way the dispensatory scheme was used by kings and nobles to essentially create a form of Catholic divorce: If you got a dispensation from the Pope to marry within the proscribed degree of consanguinity, and the marriage was an unhappy one, you could ask the Pope to revoke the dispensation and, voila, no marriage. Catholic cultures have long dealt somewhat ambiguously with the competing needs of the human heart. There is the old joke of a wealthy Italian man who loves his family, and also loves his mistress, but, unable to control his appetite for female beauty and companionship, he has a heart attack while fooling around with a third woman. His priest visits him in the hospital and tells him, "Giovanni, you have responsibilities and you must take care of yourself. You have a family. You have a successful business. I forbid you to have sex with anyone except your wife and your mistress."

I do not know if the Church will ever develop its doctrinal positions on marriage. Certainly, across the broad sweep of history, the movement towards our current teaching on marriage can and should be viewed as an accomplishment: women are not viewed as mere chattel in marriage contracts, arranged marriages have no validity within the Catholic moral compass, lifelong commitments are better certainly than the "hook up" culture of the ambient society. It is also the case that for all but the last few decades, Christian cultures have assumed that homosexual acts were undertaken by heterosexuals acting in an aberrant fashion. Only since the late 60s and early 70s did anyone, including churchmen, come to think of homosexuality as a given, as something constitutional and not chosen. Recall that it was only in the early 70s that the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of defects.

The 70s not only witnessed changing views about homosexuality, it witnessed an unprecedented breakdown in traditional family life. Divorce rates sky-rocketed. The number of out-of-wedlock births sky-rocketed. The abortion rate sky-rocketed. Against this backdrop, the Church seemed hopelessly out-of-date or stunningly prescient, depending on one's point of view. I think we are past time, however, when we can acknowledge that the collapse of traditional marriage is not a good thing, not for the individuals involved, not for society at large, and most especially not for the children who have grown up without the security of a traditional family life. There are many and varied reasons for the breakdown of traditional family life, and I think the culture desperately needs to focus on the role of economics in creating the pressures that unleashed the collapse of traditional marital norms. But, certainly, those of us on the Catholic Left who care about poverty cannot deny the links between the decline of two-parent households and the lack of social and human possibilities for the children who grow up without the stability and security of a two-parent household. All of us, straight and gay, should be worried about traditional family life and its health.

I doubt this concern about marriage will not be enough to convince anyone that the Church's teachings on homosexuality are not rooted in bigotry or out-dated ideas about sexuality, which is why efforts to combat anti-gay prejudice are so important. The Church can and should do all it can to oppose unjust discrimination. Melady's and Cizik's article calling for Christian witness on behalf of fundamental human rights for gays in Uganda is not unprecedented. In the 1990s, the USCCB issued a document called, "Always Our Children," addressed to the parents and families of gay men and women, reminding them that if a family member is gay, they are still a family member. "Always Our Children" was theologically bullet-proof, but it was also groundbreaking. It was an example of the Church doing what it can to combat anti-gay bigotry.

I will write more about this issue tomorrow. But, it really should not be controversial to insist that the Catholic Church has a moral obligation to rid itself of hatred and animus within its ranks. Melady and Cizik point to an

example of how the Church can do this in a part of the globe that is beyond the reach of most gay rights organizations but where the Church is influential. Certainly, coming to the defense of gay men and women in Uganda is the right thing to do, but it will also invite the Church to demonstrate Christian solidarity with gay men and women and, just so, how its teachings on homosexuality cannot be breezily dismissed as mere bigotry.

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[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/guest-voices/post/christian-witness-for-gays-in-uganda/2012/05/24/gJQAVsNenU_blog.html