

Voting No and No: A Catholic Perspective  
By Jamie L. Manson  
Presented to Catholics for Marriage Equality  
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I am honored to be asked to speak to you during such a momentous time in the history of Minnesota. It is one thing when a state debates new laws and statutes, but when citizens are faced with the possibility of amending their constitution, their founding document, the stakes are so much higher. Laws can be tweaked or improved after they go into effect. Constitutional amendments, however, as you all well know, are much more radical.

An amendment is not ordinary rule of law, and when an amendment passes, it is much harder to change, it is above the heads of everyone, and, perhaps most seriously, it imposes itself very seriously on future generations.

Both amendments will alter the course of civil rights in this state and will place significant limits on the freedoms of the citizens of Minnesota. In the case of voter id, laws that were won after many bloody struggles for voting rights fought in the 1960s, most notably the historic march from Selma to Montgomery, will be put in jeopardy. Once again, arbitrary barriers, will prevent U.S. citizens from exercising one of their most fundamental rights.

In the case of the marriage amendment, the possibility of achieving equal rights and equal protections under the law for same-sex couples will become far more difficult, far more out of reach.

It is shocking in this day and age that civil rights issues can be put on a ballot and decided by a general election. But this is the situation before Minnesota. They are decisions that have been faced by other states, sometimes with tragic consequences.

Voting No and No is the only way to ensure that civil rights will be protected for our most marginalized citizens, be they LGBT couples, or the poor, the elderly, the disabled, the students many of whom will likely not meet the requirements for voter id.

We have heard from a panel of experts tonight what makes both amendments so wrong for us as citizens in the United States.

I've been invited tonight to explore with you why both amendments are so wrong for us as Catholics, and what kind of response both amendments demand of those of us who value the Catholic social justice tradition—a tradition that, in the vale of

tears that our hierarchy has been leading us through, has been a life line, keeping us connected and proud of our Catholic identities, helping us to remain faithful to the tradition, even if we cannot abide by many of the political moves and exclusionary tactics put into play by the hierarchy.

When it comes to creating scandal lately—whether its about denying communion, or penalizing the work of women religious, or failing to speak clearly and strongly against the Ryan budget, or creating hysteria through false claims about religious freedom—the hierarchy truly have been gift that keeps on giving.

But, to me, hierarchy's willingness to speak so ardently against same-sex marriage, to funnel so much money into anti-marriage equality campaigns through organizations like the Knights of Columbus, to produce and send out anti-gay DVDs, to write letters to each of you asking for donations to fund TV ads, to mobilize volunteers, and to otherwise harp on this issue, while also saying so little about Voter ID, is to me one of the greatest scandals being committed by the Roman Catholic Church right now.

It is of course very possible that church leaders haven't said as much as they should against voter id because they do not want to displease those conservative political allies who share their anti-marriage equality or religious freedom agendas. As has been proven time and time again, in the hierarchy of issues that matter to the Roman Catholic bishops, pelvic zone issues occupy the very top of the pyramid, while issues related to the poor and vulnerable fall to the bottom.

In the past few months, there have been several startling cases in which the hierarchy has practically used the poor as pawns in their fight against marriage equality.

Back in April, the *New York Times* reported on social service groups who are being denied funding by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) because of "supposed" alliances with organizations that support equal rights for gay, lesbian, and transgender persons. These are groups that support immigrants, victims of HIV/AIDS, the homeless who have made alliances with groups that also happen to have made alliances with groups that advocate for civil unions or same-sex marriage. And for that, the church is denying them crucial grants.

Add to this scandal, the foster children who were abandoned by Catholic Charities in Illinois because of a law allowing gay and lesbian parents to adopt children, and we begin to realize that one injustice gives birth to many more. And injustice for one population within our church, is injustice for all of the God's people.

LGBT people aren't the only ones who lose in these ideological battles. The poor, the immigrants, the homeless, the orphans, and the sick do, too. The hierarchy is letting the ideology of extreme social conservatives, not the teachings of the Gospel, determine where and how the poor will receive aid.

We saw this reality, this spring when explosive documents were released confirming what many in the marriage equality movement had long suspected. For years, the right-wing National Organization for Marriage (NOM) has intentionally tried to galvanize the black community against the gay community.

NOM also targeted Latinos with a strategy to “interrupt the process of assimilation” that could sway them to support gay rights. Their goal was to tap “glamorous” Latin American spokespeople to speak out against marriage equality.

One of NOM’s strongest allies has been the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and one of their key funders is the Knights of Columbus.

In their zeal to defeat marriage equality, the bishops have colluded in a system where blacks and Latinos were exploited as political tools. Which leaves me asking, how many more of its own social justice doctrines will the hierarchy continue to defy in its hell-bent desire to deny gays and lesbian equal protection under the law? How many social evils will the Catholic hierarchy ignore, how many injustices will they overlook, in order to fulfill its mission against equality for members of the LGBT community?

But, as Ricardo Levins Morales has pointed out in his recent blog posted on the Twin Cities daily planet, in the case of Voter ID, this strategy will eventually backfire on the bishops.

Morales argues that, though both amendments have different goals, both fights share a strategic link:

“The ‘Voter ID’ amendment,” he says, “is a power play. It’s the lynchpin of the Right Wing’s current strategy to win control of the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government and impose their regressive agenda on society. The idea is to place enough obstacles in the way of voting--designed to disadvantage poor folks, people of color, students, the homeless and the disabled--to tip elections their way.”

Morales continues, “Only a small percentage of these people would need to be disenfranchised in order for the plan to be effective. Depressed voter turnout--along with unlimited corporate cash--would secure Tea Party/Koch Brothers/Republican dominance in state legislatures thus giving them control over Congressional redistricting plans, ensuring their electoral advantage for the foreseeable future.”

Where gay marriage has grabbed a lot of attention and a decent amount of funding, Voter ID has attracted less attention. And that is precisely the goal of the conservative developers of the amendment. “While everyone has rushed to defend the front door of fighting for gay rights,” Morales says, “the vote suppression commandoes are sneaking in the back, disabling the burglar alarm and preparing to seize the property.”

Therefore, if Voter ID passes, LGBT rights will become one of many issues that will be in the metaphorical crosshairs of right wing law-makers. Every issue from early childhood education or sustainable food production or collective bargaining or civil liberties or accessible health care will be in jeopardy if conservatives, tea partyers, are allowed this much power.

“In the case of the Catholic Church,” Morales writes, “volunteers are pounding the pavement for the Marriage Amendment in Minnesota, unaware that they are pawns in a political power grab that would ultimately undue many of the social values they hold to,” like government entitlements that care for the elderly, poor and homeless, or protections for immigrants.

In the long and short term, many of the support systems that at the core of Catholic social teaching could be at risk if voter id passes.

But what if we had no personal investment in voter id? What if, as LGBT persons and allies, voter id would have no impact on the future of our civil rights? Should we still be invested in it?

My reading of Catholic social justice teaching tells us, yes, absolutely.

What if the marriage amendment had to direct impact on us or our families? What if only the voter id amendment would impact us or our communities. Should we still be invested in it?

My reading of Catholic social justice teaching tells us, yes, absolutely.

The modern social teaching of the church is found primarily in papal encyclicals and documents produced by synods of bishops. Starting with Leo XIII’s Rerum Novarum in 1891, the body of thought has evolved through the years, shaped by the social, economic, political and cultural realities of the times. But even though each document is developed in response to the needs of the historical period in which the document was written, certain key themes pervade all of teachings. They are, to name a few:

Primacy of the person; the protect of human dignity and human rights; participation as a basic right; solidarity of the human family; and the special claim of the poor and vulnerable

All documents call Christians to work for structures to make a more just and peaceful world. They call individuals play a key role in responding to unjust situations because action for justice is a constituent part of being Christian.

Throughout the documents, church consistently supports democracy as "the best expression of the direct participation of citizens in political choices." With it comes a responsibility to work toward the integral promotion of the human person and the common good.

And a number of the documents seemed almost tailored to questions about voter id.

In 1963 in the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, John XXIII affirms full range of human rights as the basis for peace.<sup>1</sup>

1979 in the encyclical called *Redeemer of Humankind*, John Paul II focuses on threats to human dignity and freedom, including obstacles to full participation in society and the political process.

1971, Paul VI writing on the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* in a document called "Call to Action," addresses the struggle of what he calls the "new poor": which includes the elderly, the handicapped, and the cities' marginalized—people disadvantaged because of urbanization. (Interesting, these are the populations of people who would be most affected by voter id.) He notes the lingering discrimination because of race, origin, color, culture, sex, and religion. He stresses personal responsibility on the part of Christians in seeing that injustice is challenged. In combating injustice, we are called to focus on political action—not just economic action. We are encouraged as individual Christians and local churches to apply gospel principles of justice to contemporary situations and take appropriate political action.<sup>2</sup>

As these social justice documents have developed over the past two centuries, three key elements have emerged out of the teaching.

The first is subsidiarity. A word that has come up quite a bit in Catholic discussions about the Ryan budget.

As Professor Gerald Bayer wrote recently in a critique of the Ryan budget in *America* magazine, "the principle of subsidiarity was developed to ensure that governments work in tandem with individuals and local groups to promote the common good. In other words, subsidiarity protects the right and duty of participation. Persons cannot fulfill their right and duty to participation if they suffer from poverty, discrimination, unemployment, untreated illnesses, etc. Both civil society and the

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<sup>1</sup> The Busy Christians Guide to Catholic Social Teaching, *U.S. Catholic*, [http://www.uscatholic.org/busy\\_christians\\_guide\\_catholic\\_social\\_teaching](http://www.uscatholic.org/busy_christians_guide_catholic_social_teaching)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

state have the responsibility to create the conditions for the full participation of all in the common good.”

The second key element is solidarity, which, according to Bayer, requires “advocating for social change on the structural level. This is the case because eliminating the causes of the suffering of the wounded and oppressed requires embodying solidarity in social policies and institutions. In other words, solidarity includes but goes beyond charity to promote justice and human rights, particularly by empowering the marginalized. Charity is important, but never sufficient to meet the needs of the poor”--even Pope Benedict says so in recently letter *Caritas in Veritate*.

Both of these principles, subsidiarity and solidarity, are the elements that make up the cornerstone of Catholic Social teaching: protecting and promoting the Common Good.

The third key element is bound up in a phrase that most Catholics have heard of, many have invoked, but few understand how radical it really is: that is, the preferential option for the poor. In fact, if the Roman Catholic hierarchy were faithful to the preferential option for the poor, not only would they lose all of their allies in the Republican party, they would be the Tea Party’s public enemy number one.

Why? Because the preferential option for the poor not only demands that we think of the poor first in all of our decision-making—that the needs and impact on the poor should be our first priority and consideration—but that the poor, vulnerable and marginalized should have the best of everything. For example, in this ongoing fight about access to healthcare, the preferential option for the poor would say that those who have the least, who are least able to contribute, should have the very best in medical care.

It’s the polar opposite of the pull your own weight and “trickle down” rhetoric we’ve been hearing about in our political discourse lately.

It is a very challenging teaching, and it is challenging precisely because it is rooted in the gospel message. It is based on the belief, put forth famously in the parable of the prodigal son, in a God who offers effusive amounts of gifts and mercy to those who, by rational human standards, don’t deserve it.

It is a teaching as radical as Jesus was. And I don’t think there is any religious tradition—Christian or non-Christian--that parallels it.

Why are these social justice teachings so unique to the Catholic tradition? Because they are based on another tradition that is uniquely Catholic: our sacramental understanding of the world.

I didn't know much about the Catholic sacramental tradition until I had to step outside of it. I grew up on Long Island where, it seemed, everyone was either Catholic or Jewish. I did not meet a Protestant until I was in my early twenties.

I went from this working class, Italian Catholic upbringing in New York to this ivy-league school with forty different kinds of Protestants.

I had studied theology for four years as an undergraduate. But in my theology classes at Yale, I studied Protestant theologians with some very Protestant classmates. I noticed that when many of them talked about God, they spoke of God as "holy other." God, for them, seemed outside the realm of day to day human experience. Their theological discourse centered on ideas about "justification" and "sanctification." Language that was quite new to me.

I had come out of a Catholic high school and college where I learned about the God of Dorothy Day, I learned about the God of Oscar Romero, the God whose face we see in the poor. I learned about that God that we see in brokenness, the God who emerges in the gutter. I learned about the God of the mystics; the omnipresent God of Teilhard de Chardin. The God who is everywhere. And suddenly I wasn't hearing about that God in my Divinity School classes.

I went into a crisis. I thought I mustn't have any gift for theology. I thought I had a calling. So I made an appointment with a professor named Margaret Farley to help me understand my struggles and discern my future.

And she said, "Jamie, don't worry. Don't leave Yale. You're just a Catholic. You have a sacramental view of the world."

She explained that, as a Catholics, certain beliefs were just ingrained in us. And, going all the way back to the Reformation, Catholic and Calvinists had significant differences in the way we understood human nature and the power of grace. The key theological concept that distinguished the Catholic view from the Calvinist view was in the understanding of the relationship between grace and nature.

In old, traditional Protestantism – you don't hear this much in the mainline tradition like the church we're in tonight, but you still hear this in the evangelical tradition – human beings were seen as wholly depraved. Humanity is sinful and fallen, and God saves human beings in spite of themselves. In Calvinism, the human person had to die to the old self, and then God, through God's grace would make you new, would make you reborn in Christ.

For the Catholic, grace perfects nature. In Catholic theology, human beings are a mess, and we're born into a very messy world, but there's intrinsic goodness in us, because we're created by God, and everything that God creates is good. So God redeems us only from our sinfulness, not from who we are. For Catholics, there is a dynamic relationship with God, and human beings cooperate in their own

transformation. And quite often we grow in our relationship and understanding of God through our relationships with one another.

Catholics have a sacramental view of the world. For a Catholic, all of creation is good, and everything in our finite world can be a vessel of God's presence and God's transforming grace. All of our human relationships have the possibility of bringing the life of God into the world. That includes encounters that we have with other human beings, including the poor, the vulnerable and the desolate. Those encounters are brimming with the potential to encounter God. As Jesus tells us in Matthew 25, it is in doing something for the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick and prisoner that we actually get to do something to God, to touch God, to encounter God. This idea provides the foundation for Catholicism's rich sacramental theology and it is this theology that truly gives life and meaning to social justice doctrine.

Why? Because Social Justice teachings about the Common Good, subsidiarity, solidarity and the preferential option for the poor are all derived from our sacramental understanding of human beings. It is rooted in Catholic belief in the intrinsic goodness in all of people, because we all are God's children. Our human dignity is based upon the belief that we are created in God's image and likeness. God's image radiates from every human face, whether gay or straight, elderly or sick, poor or vulnerable.

Now, understanding and believing deeply in this sacramental theology has caused me profound confusion when I consider not only the Roman Catholic hierarchy's treatment of same-sex couples, but it's unholy alliances with anti-gay Evangelical groups in the fight against marriage equality.

Given Calvin's ideas about total depravity and the human being having to completely die to the old self, it's easier to understand why Evangelicals believe that that no good can come out of a same sex relationship and why it is possible to get "reparative therapy" for being gay: it's just part of the process of dying to the old, irredeemable self, right?

But in the Catholic understanding of grace and nature, this rich idea that the sacred can come forth in any corner of the world or out of even the most unexpected person, the harsh critiques that we hear from Catholic hierarchs about LGBT persons just don't make theological sense.

Official Roman Catholic teaching bases its teaching on homosexuality the theory of natural law, arguing that all sex acts must take place within the state of marriage and must have the potential to create new life. This is why, according to the doctrine, sexual intercourse must always be involved in any sexual activity between a wife and husband.



Since same-sex couples do not have “complementing genders” and, therefore, cannot procreate, the church believes their relationships are by their very nature inferior and, in fact, intrinsically disordered.

In our post-Vatican II milieu, most of us have recognized that procreation alone does not lead to the flourishing of married couples. Many couples that choose not to reproduce or who are infertile have demonstrated that their relationships can be just as fruitful and life-giving as marriages that produce children. So why can't the doctrine extend to same-sex couples?

If a sacrament is a sign of God's grace, it follows that relationships that are a signs of God's love, mercy, forgiveness, and faithfulness are sacramental. These signs of grace are part of the new life that married couples are called to bring into the world, with or without children.

As I learned from my childhood, witnessing many unhappily married couples, complementing genders and an ability to reproduce in no way guarantees that a marriage will be graced or sacramental. A marriage is good and holy because it help both partners to grow in generosity, compassion, mercy, and faithfulness.

There are far more ways to be fruitful than simply conceiving children. Some married couples are called to raise children. But *all* married couples are called to bring the life of God into the world by caring for one another, working to mend our broken world, and by being a sign of faithfulness to our community.

That many gay couples long for children bears witness to how fruitful their love is. The fact that most gay and lesbian couples endure extraordinary physical, emotional, and financial hardships to have children demonstrates of how deep their desire and commitment is to widening their loving relationship by creating a family.

To make procreation and gender complementarity the criteria for marriage simply does not do justice to the Catholic sacramental imagination. To believe that a sacramental marriage cannot happen between two people of the same sex is to place limits on God's power to work within the relationships of God's beloved children.

If we take seriously the Catholic notion of sacramental love, then our concerns shouldn't be over the anatomies of a couple, but whether or not the couple, through their commitment, brings the grace of God more fully into our world. Is their relationship inspiring others to greater faithfulness? Are they a sign of the power of forgiveness and unconditional love? Are the sacrifices that they make for one another an incarnation of the selfless love to which Jesus calls us?

Rather than concern over the anatomical reality of a couple, the sacramental nature of marriage should judged by whether there is equality and mutuality between spouses, whether the relationship helps both spouses to flourish individually and as

a couple, and whether their relationship brings the love, mercy, and faithfulness of God more fully into our world.

So, for me, the reason that both the marriage amendment and the voter id amendment violate my Catholic beliefs is because both amendments disregard the dignity of the human person. Both throw up barriers between a citizen's ability to have full participation and equal protection under the law.

But even more deeply, the reason that both the marriage amendment and the voter id amendment violate my Catholic beliefs is because both amendments disregard and, in fact, do harm to the sacramental life that is working and flowing through LGBT couples, through the poor, elderly, marginalized, and the disadvantaged.

Many people in Minnesota I have spoken with have said that if one amendment is defeated, but the other one passes, it will feel like a hollow victory. Such a thought articulates beautifully the Catholic social justice call for "solidarity between all peoples." As Pope Paul VI's wrote in *Populorum Progressio*, "there can be no progress towards the complete development of the human person without the simultaneous development of all humanity in the spirit of solidarity."

John Paul II fleshed out this idea further in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, where he says that solidarity is "not a feeling of vague compassion, but a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, that is to say to the good of all and of each individual because we are all really responsible for all."

Johan Verstraeten in "Rethinking Catholic Social Thought As A Tradition" (2000) points out that solidarity is bearing "radical witness to our love of our neighbor." It goes far beyond any form of enlightened self-interest and includes "relationships of community, sociability, conviviality, civility, fraternity, civic friendship, social consciousness, and public spirit. Without solidarity any understanding of other values such as justice, human rights, freedom, subsidiarity and the common good in Catholic thought is impossible."

So, as you go to the polls next month, and you vote no and no, you will be defending civil rights; you will be protecting future generations; As Catholic you will also be honoring your social justice tradition in your act of solidarity, and you will be participating the sacramental life by recognizing our calling to affirm the goodness, value and holiness of each individual as a beloved child of God.

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