

Tips on Speaking as a Catholic in Support of Marriage Equality and Against the Proposed “Marriage Amendment”

Catholics for Marriage Equality MN

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The following tips and talking points have been compiled to help you talk as a Catholic about the issue of marriage equality with your family members, legislators, fellow parishioners, neighbors and friends.

In preparation for conversing with others, it’s recommended that you become familiar with the material below and home in on what aspects of it resonates with you. You may discover that these particular aspects enable you to communicate more passionately and confidently. Also, when talking about this issue it’s not necessary to delve into complex theological arguments. Keep your message simple and heartfelt. A key component is to be sure to state that *you are a Catholic, that you do not support the proposed marriage amendment, and that you do support marriage equality for all*. Also, if you have LGBT loved ones in your life, mention what they, their spouses and/or their families mean to you, and how any constitutional amendment banning civil marriage for them would negatively impact their lives. In the final analysis, this is about basic fairness and compassion.

Following are some additional tips and talking points.

1. Remember: We’re in the majority!

When identifying yourself as a Catholic in support of marriage equality, note that as such you stand with the majority of Catholics. Recent and credible opinion polls show that U.S. Catholics – as many as 73% – are more supportive of LGBT rights, including same-sex marriage, than the general public and other Christians. [1, 2] Accordingly, be clear in stating that in actively working to legalize a ban on same-sex civil marriage, the Minnesota Catholic bishops are *not* representing the majority of Catholics.

2. Use the language of your Catholic faith and the teachings of the Church to inform and bolster your support of marriage equality and your opposition to the proposed “marriage amendment.”

Explain how your support for marriage equality is informed by your Catholic faith. You can begin by noting that as a Catholic you value compassion, justice, family, truth-telling and love, and that you’ve witnessed all of these qualities and values in the lives and relationships of LGBT people. As one Catholic puts it: ‘I see the face of God in the love of same-sex couples.’

Also highlight the fact that your support for marriage equality is informed by Church teaching. For example, the Church teaches that:

- (i) The “intrinsic dignity of each person must always be respected in word, in action and in law.” [3]
- (ii) The “fundamental human rights and responsibilities of all people” – including LGBT people – must be recognized, and “any and all forms of injustice, oppression or violence against LGBT people must be eliminated.” [4]
- (iii) In 1991 Minnesota Archbishop John Roach noted that “homosexual persons . . . like all people have a right to human respect, economic security and social equality.” [5]

Note how you believe that civil marriage is a “**fundamental human right**” necessary for “**social equality**,” and that the effort on the part of the bishops to legalize a ban on same-sex civil marriage is unreasonable, unjust, oppressive, discriminatory, and hurtful. Furthermore, these same efforts are a violation of the Church’s own teaching.

- (iv) “Government is to see to it that equality of citizens before the law, which is itself an element of the common good, is never violated, whether openly or covertly, for religious reasons. Nor is there to be discrimination among citizens.” [6]

How discriminatory *is* the proposed “marriage amendment”? If passed by a simple majority of those voting in the 2012 election, this amendment would write discrimination into the Minnesota Constitution, and perpetuate such laws as the following five current Minnesota Statutes – along with 510 other statutes – that deny same-sex persons in long-term committed relationships those rights automatically guaranteed by state law to married heterosexual couples.

- The same-sex partner of a patient in a hospital is not included at all on the list of people who may provide consent for treatment if the patient were unable to give his or her own consent. In some cases, same-sex partners might not even be allowed to visit a partner in the hospital, even with legal paperwork describing the couple's wishes. (Minn. Statutes, Section 253B.03)
- Important events in the family of the same-sex partner of a child's parent, such as family emergencies or the death or serious illness or funeral of an immediate family member, might not qualify as a legitimate exemption from school absence. (Section 120A.22)
- A surviving same-sex partner cannot inherit any of the deceased partner's estate if his or her partner dies without a will. (Section 524.2-102)
- The coroner is not allowed to release to a same-sex partner personal items – such as clothes and other personal property of limited value – routinely given to the spouse or any blood relative of the person who has died. (Section 525.393)
- A long-term same-sex partner is not allowed to receive workers' compensation benefits if their spouse is killed at work. (Section 176.111)

– Source: Project 515
(www.project515.org)

Enshrining such a discriminatory approach to marriage in the State Constitution would make future legislation guaranteeing the legal equality of same-sex couples very difficult, if not impossible. Further, if this amendment becomes part of the Minnesota Constitution, future challenges in the courts would be very difficult.

4. Appeal to the “Golden Rule”

Highlight Jesus’ invitation to: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” (Matthew 7:12) This tenet of all the world religions is known as the “Golden Rule.” Following is how one can explain the Golden Rule as it relates from a Catholic perspective to the issue of marriage equality.

It is a serious violation of justice when a majority of Catholics vote to enact laws, based on an official teaching of the Catholic hierarchy, that deny the civil and human rights of a minority group of citizens. Catholics wouldn’t like it if another voting majority of persons passed laws, based on *their* values and beliefs, that would require of Catholics certain behaviors or deny their civil and human rights. In a religiously pluralistic society such as the U.S., “Do unto others as you would have then do unto you” is a common ethic of citizens, and one that should be upheld and defended.

5. Be prepared to be challenged

Your support of marriage equality may well be challenged, especially by fellow Catholics who oppose homosexuality and/or same-sex marriage.

Challenge #1 – *The official teaching of the pope and the bishops still stands: gay sexual relations are wrong. As a Catholic you should be following this teaching and not supporting gay marriage.*

One way to respond to this type of statement is to highlight the following four aspects of Catholic tradition:

- (i) **The Primacy of Conscience.** The current pope, then Cardinal Ratzinger, said that “conscience is the highest norm which [we] must follow even in opposition to authority.” [7] The Church also teaches that our consciences must be “well-formed,” i.e., formed by the Church. But we should not limit “the Church” to the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. In its broadest and most *catholic* sense, the Church is the *entire* people of God, the whole Body of Christ. Thus in forming our consciences we should not just be open to the teachings of the Magisterium (the official teaching body of the Church) but also to the insights of theologians and the experiences of the entire people of God – known as the *sensus fidelium*, or, *the sense of the faithful*. In fact, in Catholicism, all three – the hierarchy, the theologians, and the wisdom of the laity – are recognized as the Church’s authentic sources of truth. They are the three “magisteria.” When one considers what Catholic theologians and the Catholic people are thinking and saying about the issue of homosexuality and same-sex relationships, at the very least we have to acknowledge the possibility that *Vatican* teaching on this issue may not actually be the *Catholic* teaching. An excellent example of a more recent change based on the sense of the faithful is the fact that the vast majority of married Catholics are practicing birth control in spite of the official teaching of the hierarchy. This teaching does not make good sense to the Catholic people as it does not fit with their lived experience.
- (ii) **The Evolving Nature of Church Teaching.** The difference between what the Vatican says and what the wider Church is saying (and doing) is a clear sign that this particular issue is not yet settled. As a church, we are still grappling with this aspect of human reality. That’s okay, as it’s a sign of a living, growing church. This is how we, as a church, have always dealt with moral issues, such as the role of women in the Church, the charging of interest on loans, slavery, our relationship with other religions, etc. We have seen major changes in our understanding of these issues. Our understanding of homosexuality is also changing as we acknowledge and take into consideration the findings of science and people’s lived experience – all valid sources for theological reflection and the ongoing development of church teaching.

Related to this is the need to be aware that the “official” teaching of the Church on same-sex relationships is built on what is called “natural law.” In other Christian denominations, this particular argument against gay people and same-sex marriage is termed the “basic biology” argument. The natural law theory goes back to Thomas Aquinas and is based on the Stoic idea that everything has a proper and final purpose or “end” (*telos*). Official Roman Catholic teaching says that the proper (and final) purpose of sex is biological procreation. Because gay sex, masturbation and contraceptive sex are not “open” to this one and final purpose of sex, they are viewed as morally wrong. The problem for contemporary people with regards to the issue of homosexuality is threefold: 1) Unlike Aquinas and his Stoic predecessors, we readily accommodate into our thinking about sexuality the reality and the experiences of gay people. 2) We also consider, unlike Aquinas, that human sexual behavior – both straight and gay – can be morally justified as an expression of human love. In other words, homosexuality like heterosexuality is morally neutral. It’s what you do with your homosexuality or your heterosexuality that determines morality. 3) People today – including Catholics – know that sex serves more than one final “end.” As Catholic theologian Daniel Helminiak notes:

To be sure, procreation is an inherent aspect of sexuality. But there is more to sex than that, especially when we look at sex in human beings. Procreation is an animal function. In humans sex is taken up into a new array of purposes. Human sex involves emotional bonding and the dreams and promises of lovers. That is to say, beyond the physical, human sex also involves the psychological and the spiritual. . . . The trend of sex is toward higher things. And since the spiritual dimension of human sexual sharing is the highest and most significant, it is what determines the unique nature of human sexuality, so it is what must be preserved in every case. Not procreation, but genuine care and loving are the non-negotiables of human sex. [8]

- (iii) **The Relationship Between Theology and Science.** The church has always held that theology is not in opposition to the sciences but that good theology must be based on good science. Because of this tenet of Catholic culture and practice, faulty teachings relating to the nature of the solar system (for which Galileo was called a heretic and imprisoned) and the role of the female ovum in reproduction, have been changed and aligned with scientific knowledge. With regards to the issue of homosexuality, such alignment with the insights of science is taking place among theologians and the Catholic people. It is yet to occur, however, at the official level of the Church.
- (iv) **The Catholic Teaching of Probabilism.** This teaching holds that when there are good reasons and good authorities on both sides of a debate on a moral issue (in this case, homosexuality and same-sex unions), Catholics are free to make up their own minds. The magisterium of the Catholic hierarchy notwithstanding, there is debate among theologians and the faithful, the *sensus fidelium*, on the issue of homosexual unions.

Catholics supportive of loving gay relationships do not believe that homosexual sex is in itself a sin. We believe heterosexism (prejudice against people who are homosexual) is a sin. As Catholic theologian Maguire, Daniel says, “It is a serious sin because it violates justice, truth, and love. It also distorts the true meaning of sex and thus also harms everyone, including heterosexuals.” [9]

Challenge #2 – *You’re cherry-picking the teachings of the Church when you highlight social justice teachings to support your cause but ignore the prohibitions on gay sex.*

One way to respond to this is to share the belief that the social justice teachings of the Church are clearly rooted in Jesus’ life and preaching. Not so the church’s teaching prohibiting gay sex. For many Catholics the call for social justice supercedes certain teachings of the church that reflect a medieval and inadequate understanding of human sexuality – teachings that, accordingly, are unresponsive to the presence and movement of the Spirit in the lives of LGBT people. They are also teachings that fail to reflect the overarching biblical theme of liberation and Jesus’ call to “fullness of life.” Gay people do indeed flourish as individuals when they accept themselves for who they are and live their lives accordingly. Indeed, human beings – gay or straight – flourish when they engage in and build relational lives that are experienced and expressed sexually. Actual sex acts are just one aspect of such relational lives. It’s the quality of these relationships that the Church should be concerned about, not so much who puts what body part where and with whom. Many consider this latter type of fixation to be typical of the psycho-sexually stunted.

Like the fig tree in Jesus’ parable, the Roman Catholic clerical leadership’s position on homosexuality is barren. In other words, it’s inattentive to “the signs of the time,” it’s unintelligible to intelligent people, it’s unreasonable, and, worst of all, it’s unloving. Catholics have every right to question this position, to require that it be clarified and justified to the point that all are satisfied. That the clerical leadership has so

far been unable to provide such clarification and justification says much about the credibility, the validity, the *truthfulness* of this particular position they hold.

Challenge #3 – *Isn't it the church's job to weigh in on important social issues? You're not opposed to the bishops making statements on issues like immigration, are you?*

One possible response to this would be to observe that in the past, when the clerical leadership of the church has shared its insights on important social issues such as racism and immigrant rights, it has done so in order to reduce discrimination and expand the circle of acceptance and inclusion. That's not happening in the case of marriage equality, and this is a betrayal of the Catholic way of being in the world – a way that should always be seeking to discern and celebrate God in the lives and experiences of *all*. Like all Christians, the bishops should be standing for the principles of justice, compassion, equality, and inclusion. When it comes to gay people, gay lives, and gay relationships they've chosen *not* to embody in their words and actions these Gospel principles.

Challenge #4 – *The Bible condemns homosexuality and same-sex relationships.*

Even though Catholic teaching about human sexuality does not rely much upon scriptural passages, some Catholics – like many other well-intended Christians – make reference to the six or seven negative passages in the Old and New Testaments on homosexual acts that have been used for centuries to condemn LGBT persons. An excellent response to such proof-texting you may encounter can be found on Soulforce's website (www.soulforce.org/article/homosexuality-bible-gay-christian). The following are a few of this site's most salient reflections on using scriptural passages to condemn LGBT persons

- (i) Many good people build their case against homosexuality almost entirely on the Bible. These folks value Scripture, and are serious about seeking its guidance in their lives. Unfortunately, many of them have never really studied what the Bible does and doesn't say about homosexuality.
- (ii) Most people have not carefully and prayerfully researched the biblical texts often used to condemn God's lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender children. As you may know, biblical ignorance is an epidemic in the United States. A recent study quoted by Dr. Peter Gomes in *The Good Book* found that 38 percent of Americans polled were certain the Old Testament was written a few years after Jesus' death. Ten percent believed Joan of Arc was Noah's wife. Many even thought the epistles were the wives of the apostles.
- (iii) This same kind of biblical ignorance is all too present around the topic of homosexuality. Often people who love and trust God's Word have never given careful and prayerful attention to what the Bible does or doesn't say about homosexuality. For example, many Christians don't know that: (1) Jesus says nothing about same-sex behavior; (2) The Jewish prophets are silent about homosexuality; and (3) Only six or seven of the Bible's one million verses refer to same-sex behavior in any way – and none of these verses refer to homosexual orientation as it's understood today.
- (iv) Most people who are certain they know what the Bible says about homosexuality don't know where the verses that reference same-sex behavior can be found. They haven't read them, let alone studied them carefully. They don't know the original meaning of the words in Hebrew or Greek. And they haven't tried to understand the historical context in which those words were written. Yet the assumption that the Bible condemns homosexuality is passed down from generation to generation with very little personal study or research. The consequences of this misinformation are disastrous, not only for God's gay and lesbian children, but for the entire church.

- (v) The biblical authors are silent about homosexual orientation as we know it today. They neither approve it nor condemn it. ... Jesus, the Jewish prophets, and even Paul never even comment on the responsible love a gay man or lesbian feels for another.
- (vi) The Bible is completely silent on the issue of homosexual orientation. And no wonder. Homosexual orientation wasn't even known until the 19th century. The discovery that some of us are created and/or shaped in our earliest infancy toward same-gender attraction was made in the last 150 years. Biblical authors knew nothing about sexual orientation. Old Testament authors and Paul assumed all people were created heterosexual, just as they believed the earth was flat, that there were heavens above and hell below, and that the sun moved up and down.

Challenge #5 – *The bishops are rightly concerned for the welfare of children. They're adamant that children are in great danger when raised by a same-sex couple. This is because a same-sex couple's relationship involves sexual acts that are fundamentally selfish and immoral. Children raised by couples who engage in such acts are disadvantaged and prone to all kinds of potential traumas and problems.*

For a church with as rich an intellectual tradition as the Roman Catholic Church, this particular argument is quite unacceptable. And we need to make this known to our bishops, our legislators and our fellow Catholics.

To help in this important task we offer the following **8 talking points that refute the Catholic hierarchy's oft repeated but erroneous claims regarding the psycho-sexual health of gay people and of children raised by same-sex couples**. These talking points are based on a comprehensive and balanced review of the scientific and professional literature pertinent to same-sex marriage. This review was undertaken by the nation's leading associations of mental health professionals and behavioral scientists (i.e., the American Psychological Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and the National Association of Social Workers) and in response to a case filed with the California Supreme Court in September 2009 involving a constitutional challenge to California's refusal to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. [10]

- (i) Homosexuality is neither a disorder nor a disease, but rather a normal variant of human sexual orientation. The vast majority of gay and lesbian individuals lead happy, healthy, well-adjusted, and productive lives.
- (ii) Many gay and lesbian people are in a committed same-sex relationship. In their essential psychological respects, these relationships are equivalent to heterosexual relationships.
- (iii) The institution of marriage affords individuals a variety of benefits that have a favorable impact on their physical and psychological well-being.
- (iv) A large number of children are currently being raised by lesbians and gay men, both in same-sex couples and as single parents. Empirical research has consistently shown that lesbian and gay parents do not differ from heterosexuals in their parenting skills, and their children do not show any deficits compared to children raised by heterosexual parents. It is the quality of the parenting that predicts children's psychological and social adjustment, not the parents' sexual orientation or gender.
- (v) By denying same-sex couples the right to marry, the State reinforces and perpetuates the stigma historically associated with homosexuality. Further, by legitimizing and reinforcing the stigma of sexual minorities and by according them inferior status relative

to heterosexuals, such institutional stigma gives rise to individual acts against gay and lesbian people, including ostracism, harassment, discrimination, and violence.

- (vi) Research indicates that experiencing stigma and discrimination is associated with heightened psychological distress among all gay men and lesbians, not only those who seek to be married.
- (vii) Children of same-sex couples may experience “stigma by association” created by the existence of separate statuses for heterosexual parents who are legally married and same-sex parents who are not married. Thus, children of unmarried parents may experience teasing at the hands of other children or may find that they are excluded from play groups, and teachers and other adults may exhibit biases that favor the children of married parents over those with unmarried parents.
- (viii) Research on parent-child relations in heterosexual parent families has consistently revealed that children’s adjustment is often related to their parents’ mental health – which is enhanced when parents are financially secure, physically and psychologically healthy, not subjected to high levels of stress, and when their relationships are stable and likely to endure. Thus, to the extent that legal recognition of their parents’ relationship enhances the stability and security of that relationship, the children of same-sex couples can be expected to benefit from that recognition.

Notes

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