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Why do so many Catholics support marriage equality? Blame the Catholic imagination

Jamie Manson | Oct. 8, 2012 Grace on the Margins

In late September, Archbishop John J. Myers of Newark, N.J., upped the ante in the hierarchy's culture war against LGBT civil rights by declaring [1] that those who support marriage equality should refrain from receiving the Eucharist. With somewhere between 52 percent and 72 percent [2] of Catholics in this country supporting same-sex marriage, a lot of people are going to be turned away hungry from the altar.

Myers articulated his position in a 16-page letter on marriage. Not surprisingly, most of the document reads as an argument against same-sex relationships rather than a pastoral letter that offers counsel on the many challenges that plague heterosexual marriages.

Myers' also calls on "Catholic politicians who serve the common good" to "defend the truth about marriage against those who would try to deconstruct or radically alter its meaning." This, too, may prove an uphill battle for the bishops since, as I have written previously [3] in *NCR*, the marriage equality movement has been advanced to a good extent by Catholic politicians. Many of the governors -- including Andrew Cuomo in New York, Martin O'Malley in Maryland and Christine Gregoire in Washington state -- who have signed marriage equality bills into law are Catholic.

Since multiple studies and surveys have confirmed that more Catholics agree with marriage equality than the overall population and history has already demonstrated that Catholics have played a key role in passing same-sex marriage legislation, I've often wondered whether there is a connection behind the Catholic theological tradition and this particular issue.

I don't think this phenomenon is evidence of increased secularization among Catholics. Cuomo, O'Malley and Gregoire, for example, all claim their faith is an important part of their identities. Nor do I think it is simply the result of Catholics having been raised in a justice-oriented tradition. The answer to why so many Catholics support marriage equality lies, I believe, in understanding the Catholic imagination.

In his book *The Catholic Imagination*, Fr. Andrew Greeley writes, "Catholics see the Holy lurking in creation. As Catholics, we find our houses and our world haunted by a sense that the objects, events and persons of daily life are revelations of grace."

The Catholic imagination, or "Catholic sacramental view of the world," as my mentor Margaret Farley calls it, has its roots in the Catholic understanding of the relationship between grace and nature.

In Catholic theology, grace perfects nature. Yes, human beings are a mess, and we're born into a very messy world. But because we are created by God and because everything God creates is good, there is intrinsic goodness in us. God offers us countless opportunities of grace to help us transform ourselves and to redeem us.

Catholics believe the finite is capable of the infinite. This is why Greely says objects, events and persons all have the capability to reveal God's grace to us. That grace can come in our experiences of love, forgiveness,

compassion, justice, sacrifice, but also in the midst of suffering, brokenness and desolation.

It is the Catholic imagination that gave Dorothy Day the vision to see a prostitute with advanced syphilis as Jesus Christ on her doorstep.

It's Catholic sacramental view of the world that allowed Pierre Teilhard de Chardin to see that "Christ has a cosmic body that extends throughout the universe."

It is the Catholic theological tradition that made Thomas Merton see, in the middle of a Louisville, Ky., shopping center, that he was so in love with all of the people buzzing around him that he longed to tell them that "they are all walking around shining like the sun."

Those with a sacramental view of the world find it challenging to separate the sacred from the profane in this world. The theological ideas that support the Catholic imagination were articulated during the Reformation period as a response to the increasingly influential theology of John Calvin and other reformers.

Calvin's understanding of grace and nature was radically different from the Catholic tradition. He believed human beings are totally depraved and enslaved to sin. God saves human beings *in spite* of who they are, not because of any intrinsic goodness or merit that they have. Calvin believed God predestines who will and who will not be saved. In order to be redeemed, the human being had to completely die to the old, irredeemable self.

Calvinism still pervades the evangelical tradition and has helped shape the evangelical position on homosexuality. Given Calvin's theological understanding of the human person as being wholly depraved and irredeemable, it's easier to understand why evangelicals can justify their belief that no good can come out of a same-sex relationship.

But the affirming nature of the Catholic view of the human person and the core Catholic belief that all finite things are capable of the infinite makes the Roman Catholic position on LGBT persons and same-sex relationships much more problematic. (And it makes the alliances that some Roman Catholic bishops have formed with many anti-gay evangelical pastors all the more troubling.)

Of course, the Roman Catholic Church bases its teaching on homosexuality on its interpretation of natural law, arguing that all sex acts must take place within the state of marriage and must have the potential to procreate.

But the Catholic imagination sees God everywhere, believes that God reveals Godself in all things and understands God can work through any human being or human relationship. By insisting that genital complementarity is an absolute requirement for marriage, the hierarchy places limits on God's power to work within all of the relationships of all God's beloved children.

Those who possess a sacramental view of the world often realize that any human person or relationship that brings love, mercy, forgiveness, kindness, generosity or faithfulness into the world is a sign of God's grace. Perhaps this is the reason so many Catholics defend marriage equality: They have recognized these graces can come forth as much through same-sex couples as heterosexual couples. Those who have a Catholic imagination recognize that a couple's ability to enter into a marriage commitment is not contingent on their anatomies, but on the depth, strength and fruitfulness of their bond.

Given their sacramental view of the world, it is little wonder that so many Catholics dissent from the bishops' disparaging characterization of LGBT persons and same-sex relationships. The hierarchy's position simply does not do justice to the power of the Catholic imagination.

So there is a deep irony in Archbishop Myers' demand that Catholics who support marriage equality should

refrain from the sacrament of the Eucharist. Because it is precisely the Catholic sacramental view of the world that helps us to see the goodness and holiness that can come from LGBT persons and same-sex unions.

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