News



Maria and Arturo Perez kiss during their convalidation ceremony at Good Shepherd Catholic Church in Alexandria, Virginia, June 24. They joined other couples blessing their civil unions. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



by Peter Feuerherd

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Disputes over sex and gender have ripped apart the Protestant world and threaten to create schism among Catholics, but perhaps there's hope for a new Reformation about such issues, theologians and writers said in an Oct. 17 panel discussion at Fordham University.

Catholics have so far weathered the storm around gender issues, while debates over same-sex marriage and other concerns have splintered other denominations, said David Cloutier, professor of moral theology at the Catholic University of America in Washington. "I sometimes think it's coming for us," he said in his concluding remarks to the discussion, sponsored by the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture. Fordham is New York's Jesuit university.

The discussion was built around the theme of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation and explored how issues around sex and gender can be confronted across the Christian spectrum.

"I hope the Catholic Church finds a way to negotiate these without breaking up," Cloutier said. Churches have other concerns as well, he said, suggesting that Christians in the United States focus on how President Donald Trump, running on a platform of hatred towards the poor and immigrants, captured the majority of white Christian voters last fall.

Megan DeFranza, an evangelical theologian based at Boston University, countered that the concerns around gender matter deeply, and that the churches are faced not only with divisions within their ranks but also widespread defections, particularly among youth.

The Catholic Church and other Christian bodies are "hemorrhaging its children," who no longer are involved in religious groups that say that God created men and women, with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people marginalized, she said.

Cloutier began the discussion with what he described as "table setting," three points about the current discussion around sexuality issues:

- Such debates usually revolve around analogies, such as tying same-sex marriage to the African-American civil rights struggles. Such analogies, said

Cloutier, may or may not be relevant. The creation story of Genesis, he noted, describes God as making male and female, creating a view among Christians that gender differences are part of creation.

- The invoking of privacy regarding sexual orientation has broken down. When Christians would support traditional notions of marriage in the past, there was an understanding that a pluralistic society would allow for others to do what they wanted as long as it did not become a public concern. That is no longer the case, said Cloutier.
- The Christian view of a common eschatology — where we are all headed — has broken down, so that the prime concern is about the here-and-now.

Other panelists rejected the traditional framework around gender issues. Eboni Marshall Turman, a professor of theology at Yale University and a pastor, said that her experience in the African-American church and as a woman caused her to reflect upon the body as a theological problem, in which Christian leaders have normalized white male heterosexuals at the expense of people of color, women, and LGBT people.

Too often, she said, teaching in the churches has sanctified oppression, from the slave trade to the widespread incarceration of black men. "The church is not God," she said.

Eve Tushnet, author of *Gay and Catholic*, said that as a lesbian who has embraced church teaching on marriage, she is in a minority. Via social media, she has connected with similar Christians who have found that churches across the spectrum reject LGBT people and that the LGBT community often has little appreciation for those who uphold traditional teachings on sexuality.

"If you can live with rejection, you can find ways to survive and find your community," she said.

She urged the churches to explore the Scriptural tradition of same-sex friendship, from David and Jonathan in the Hebrew Bible to Jesus and his disciples. She noted the Gospels' praise for those who give up their lives for their friends. Such an exalted view of friendship, said Tushnet, runs counter to social norms that see happiness as derived via marriage and children.

The church once formally recognized declarations of friendship, a tradition that needs to be reinvigorated, said Tushnet.

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DeFranza emphasized the emerging role of transgender people and how they fit uneasily into the current Christian landscape. As an evangelical Christian, she has embraced the study of church history, because "it shows a record of all the times we got it wrong."

That includes the treatment of transgender people. She noted that Jesus, in Matthew's Gospel, describes those who are "eunuchs for the kingdom." That has been relegated largely to a discussion of celibacy, but she said that Jesus was making a reference to those who don't fit into traditional male/female roles, a reality that was recognized in the ancient world.

In Acts 8, the unnamed Ethiopian eunuch is noted as a model for Christians. The Christian tradition, she said, later abandoned the Jesus ideal of respect for transgender people as too radical.

"What we are learning about science and gender is changing," she said, noting that church reformers need to relook at how Christianity has viewed transgender people. Christian scholars, such as Thomas Aquinas, translated the knowledge of the day into a Christian framework. DeFranza said that is the current challenge.

"We need to do what they did even if it means not saying what they said," noted DeFranza.

In a question-and-answer session, other issues emerged.

The social media campaign of #MeToo emerged after new widespread publicity over alleged sexual harassment in Hollywood and given statements and accusations of the current president; victims of workplace exploitation and of sexual harassment, abuse and attacks have come forward.

The panelists were asked what the Christian response to such campaigns should be.

Turman called for churches to convene "spaces of radical listening" that can provide a safe place for victims of harassment and other forms of exploitation.

"People sin and need to repent," said DeFranza, invoking an evangelical theme. She also noted that women scholars are getting discouraged, often leaving Christian

traditions and teaching positions because of the belief that "patriarchy is baked into the tradition" and will never change.

Cloutier argued that a factor in widespread sexual harassment is that there is no social consensus on sexual ethics.

"We talk both ways," he said, noting that the confusion is particularly evident on campuses. "Is sex trivial? Or is it really, really serious?"

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