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More on Latino Catholic Views on Gay Marriage

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Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, I looked at the new survey of California voters and their views on same-sex marriage, specifically the great divide between Catholic Latinos and Protestant Latinos, with 57 percent of the former supporting same-sex marriage compared to only 22 % of the latter. I am sure that this news caused some conservatives, who view same-sex marriage as a profound threat to traditional marriage, to decry the lack of proper catechesis and some liberals, whose hostility to the hierarchy is unbounded, to celebrate the willingness of the Catholic laity to adopt a position at odds with the hierarchy. But, I think both stances are wrong. There is a lesson and an opportunity in the survey results.

The lesson should be obvious: In Latino culture, it is the family that mediates not only cultural views but religious ones as well and nothing is more essential to the health and holiness of a family than a spirit of acceptance. Popes and bishops can say what they wish, but no mother is going to kick her gay child out of the home. That is a good thing. It is a Catholic thing, too. Many times, prelates will point out that the Church harbors no bigotry towards gay men and women, that we affirm their God-given dignity, but then we align ourselves with bigots who do not make such precise distinctions, or we show by our absolute hostility to the aspirations of gay men and women that our concern for human dignity is less important to us than it should be. There is a kind of body language ? as well as explicit language ? that is far from welcoming, and one finds it in way too many pastors.

I suspect many of the Latino Catholics surveyed have no difficulty believing what the Church teaches about marriage, but they want that teaching applied to the circumstances of their gay family members in a way that strikes them as moral. Vienna's Cardinal Schonborn said as much when he stated the obvious: Of course it is better for gay people to be in committed relationships than not. Yes, there is a profound sense in which the complementarity of male and female is essential to what the Church teaches true Christian marriage is. But, that profound truth must find better, more persuasive ways to deal with the

lived reality of families that include gay children. The USCCB document "Always Our Children," was a large and noteworthy step in the right direction. There need to be more such statements from those in positions of authority in the Church.

If the Church does not affect family life, if the family is not the "little Church," then the Church is dead. If the faith does not generate culture, it is dead, and the generation of culture happens within the context of a family. In religion and theology classes, I learned about marriage, but it was the day-in and day-out witness of my parents that taught me what marriage is. For 54 years until my mother's death, my parents showed me by their example what it means to be faithful until "death do us part." For 54 years, especially in the difficult times, they taught me that unconditional love is not some pie-in-the-sky idea, the stuff of theological reflection, but a deeply humane way to exist in this world and in this life. Divorce, not gay unions, remains the most serious threat to Catholic beliefs about marriage, although you would not always know that if you only listened to what the bishops said.

The bishops need to view these survey results as an opportunity. They need to listen to what these Catholic Latinos are trying to tell them. It is an opportunity to celebrate the love and acceptance found in Latino families. It is an invitation to recalibrate how we present the Church's teaching on marriage in culture that is not horrified by a gay pride parade but, instead, sees people of integrity celebrating their refusal to live a lie any longer. There is something exhibitionist, and just so, disconcerting about a gay pride parade, but there is also something beautiful and profoundly Christian about men and women refusing to live a lie any longer.

I can think of no issue on which societal attitudes have changed more in my lifetime than how we as a society respect gays and lesbians. That change is the result of two phenomena. First, people started coming out of the closet. Secondly, the horrific experience of AIDS exposed the anti-gay rantings of some Christian pastors as the hateful, unchristian bias it truly was and is. I cannot think of an example in contemporary American life that more fully demonstrates the creative power of redemptive suffering than the AIDS crisis. In 1987, I served at the funeral Mass for the Rev. Michael Peterson, who was the first priest to publicly disclose that he was dying of AIDS. At the end of the Mass, Cardinal Hickey spoke to the congregation. I do not recall his exact words, but in effect he said that all of his life he had prayed before the crucified Lord but in the last few months, visiting Father Peterson in the hospital daily, he had witnessed the crucifixion in a way he had not before and that this led him to cling evermore to the Cross of Christ. It was a courageous and bold affirmation of our faith at a time many pastors were still calling AIDS "God's punishment." I shall never forget the tears in Cardinal Hickey's eyes, or those in my own eyes, as he spoke those words.

Greater theological minds than mine must wrestle with our Catholic theology of marriage. But, the Latino Catholics of California are telling the whole Church something powerful, something about family, something about love and acceptance, and something about what it means to be a Catholic and a Christian.

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