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Love the sinner. Period.

by Kate Childs Graham

Those of you who are regular readers of the "Young Voices" column know that we tackle some fairly controversial topics here. More often than not, the comment section fills up quickly with thoughts from those who agree with the columns and those who disagree. This lively debate is what keeps me going. I love that Catholics of every stripe come to this virtual space to support, to challenge, to discover how we can be a better church.

I can't pretend, though, that some of the less-than-positive comments don't bother me. I know that in putting my life out there, I should be open to all sorts of criticism. And I am, to an extent. However, recently I've been wrestling with a common theme among these negative comments:

Love the sinner, hate the sin.

At first glance, the phrase makes perfect sense. It gives us an "out" for loving all the time. It lets me love someone like Rush Limbaugh while simultaneously hating my perception of his sins. It allows me to say things like, "Oh, I love them as people, I just hate what they do or what they stand for," and feel OK about it. I'm just loving the sinner and hating the sin. That love trumps hate, right?

Then, I started to wonder why we need to hate at all. Certainly, Jesus didn't teach that. Jesus was all about love. Love God. Love our neighbors. And on one occasion he even said to his followers, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." And not one of them threw a stone at the woman who had been accused of adultery. They all were with sin. We all are with sin.

So, I did a little research and it turns out that the phrase is actually attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, who encouraged his followers to "love the sinner and not the sin" in regards to their oppressors. He said it to stave off more violence. And I do not believe that he ever intended for the phrase to perpetrate as much violence as it has. When we start hating, whether it is a person or an action, we stop recognizing the

dignity in the other person, which makes it easy to oppress them.

On homosexuality, the hierarchy of the Catholic church has espoused a "love the sinner, hate the sin" stance. To some, this stance may seem benevolent. To me, a member of the queer community, it isn't compassionate in the least. When someone says, "I love you as a lesbian, just not your sin of homosexual activity," all I can hear is "I don't love who you are, and I hate what you do." And, whether or not I believe that my relationship with my partner is a sin (I don't), it hurts. My sexuality, though it doesn't define me as a person, is an integral part of who I am. You can't separate it from me. The hate for my so-called sin leads to hatred for me. Because that so-called sin is me.

I know that it will be an insurmountable task for all of us to agree on the pressing moral issues of our day. All I ask is that we stop the hate and start doing what Jesus taught us. Let's stop casting stones and start loving our whole neighbor, not just the parts we like or think are free of sin. Certainly, we still need to hold each other accountable for our missteps, whatever they may be. We just can't hate those missteps. Loving isn't easy, but it is what we are called to do. Let's love the sinner and leave it at that.

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