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The Politics of Gay Marriage

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Distinctly Catholic

The women in the Bush family have something like a tradition of letting it be known that they do not share the social conservative agenda the men in the family have had to embrace to win Republican nominations. The wife of President George H. W. Bush, Barbara Bush, and the wife of President George W. Bush, Laura Bush, both let it be known that they were pro-choice, for example. Especially with Bush pere, one had the suspicion that his views on social issues were more consonant with his wife than with the GOP primary electorate. Now, Barbara Bush the younger, daughter of George W. and Laura, and granddaughter of her namesake, has made a video promoting gay marriage in New York.

I know that the bishops have decided they must fight efforts to confer legal rights on same-sex couples tooth and nail, but they have lost the battle, and Barbara Bush's renunciation is simply the latest evidence of how even conservatives are abandoning the traditional marriage ship.

In their new book, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, Robert Putnam and David Campbell note that abortion and homosexuality are the "glue" that holds the religious right together. If you divide the electorate into quintiles based on religiosity, those who are most religious oppose abortion by a 78% margin and they oppose gay marriage or civil unions by a 60% margin. Conversely, in the least religious quintile, only 18% oppose abortion and 16% oppose same sex marriage.

Putnam and Campbell also note, however, that younger people are more inclined to support same sex marriage. Virtually all generations have become more accepting of same sex marriage in the past several years, but such acceptance is especially pronounced among the young. In 1988, only about 13% of baby boomers, those born between 1946 and 1965 supported gay marriage but by 2008, almost 35% of boomers did so. By 2008, slightly more than 50 percent of young people supported gay marriage, up from about 15 percent in 1988. In part, this may have to do with the fact that religiosity increases with age, but

the numbers are so widespread among the young it includes those who are religious as well.

I remember a bishop once telling me that he feared for our society if marriage and procreation were ever irrevocably severed. Only traditional marriage could serve as the basis for a strong and vibrant society. But, that battle happened in the 1950s and 1960s. First liberalized divorce laws took away the idea that marriage was forever. Marriage came to be seen less as a sacrament, involving God, and therefore a permanent covenant, and more as a consumer choice. If this wife didn't work out, you could get another. Then, the advent of readily available contraception further severed the link between marriage and procreation. The Church, of course, does not permit divorce and it opposes contraception, but in American culture, ours is a lonely voice on such matters. Once marriage became a kind of voluntary association, it was robbed of its traditional understanding as a covenanted relationship to which God was a party.

The culture is wrong. A husband is not a commodity and a marriage is not merely a voluntary association like other voluntary associations. It is, for us Catholics, a sacrament. Although since the Reformation, our Protestant brothers and sisters have not seen it as a sacrament, many still hold to the belief that marriage is "one man and one woman for one lifetime." But, with as many marriages ending in divorce as not, the social stigma attached to divorce has evaporated. There is no competing with television shows like "The Bachelor" or "The Dating Game" when it comes to shaping the culture.

The acceptance of same sex marriage by such prominent Republicans as Ken Mehlman, Ted Olsen, and the Bush women, is unlikely to affect the 2012 nominating process. Social conservatives are too organized and too involved in the Iowa caucuses and the South Carolina primary to permit anyone who endorses such socially liberal ideas from garnering the presidential nod. Indeed, efforts to reach out to conservative gays risk upsetting the GOP coalition: Mitch Daniels got hammered for suggesting a "truce" on social issues so that Republicans could concentrate on economic issues and some groups have refused to participate in the annual CPAC convention because they have invited a gay rights group.

I do not know how or if our culture can ever recapture the profoundly beautiful idea of human love that the Church's belief in traditional marriage as a sacrament was intended to enfold. Too often, that beauty is obscured by hateful, anti-gay bigotry, which has no place in any Christian pulpit or Christian heart, even when traditional marriage is being celebrated. But, I do know this: When the daughter of the most conservative President in modern American history embraces gay marriage, politically, the issue has been decided.

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