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Moving the fence around marriage: the conscience of a Catholic senator

Julie Gunter | Sep. 25, 2012

Washington state Sen. Debbie Regala (University of Puget Sound/Ross Mulhausen)

TACOMA, Wash. -- For state Sen. Debbie Regala, only the venue has changed. Stepping into the simple sanctuary, dark beams anchoring the low-slung ceiling crisscross overhead; the nave, flowing wide rather than long, is framed by pews, a modest organ, and slim panels of stained glass. At its entrance, an astonishingly large baptismal pool beckons as water does; one wonders how parishioners keep children from splashing in it.

St. Leo Parish represents a spiritual home for people of diverse views and backgrounds, and Regala, a devout Catholic, now counts herself among them. Her decision to join this parish and leave her former church -- a beloved faith community for more than 40 years-- wasn't easily reached, yet it's a change Regala has not only come to accept, but embrace.

Setting this departure in motion was a decision related to her work rather than her faith: Regala voted Feb. 13 in favor of Senate Bill 6239, legislation that will extend the right of marriage to same-sex couples if Referendum 74 passes in November.

After that vote, and to her surprise, Regala received a flurry of critical emails from parishioners of her home parish, St. Patrick in Tacoma. Well-versed in responding to constituents' feedback, both positive and negative, after almost 20 years in public office, these messages had entered, literally, a sacred place.

Comments ranged from general disapproval to disappointment to outrage. According to Regala, one parishioner questioned her right to partake in the Eucharist while another scolded her for the years she had spent counseling engaged couples prior to their wedding ceremonies.

Uncertain of how she would be received the next time she attended Mass, Regala consulted with people she trusted inside and outside her parish. Ultimately, she and her husband, Leo, decided that it was time to move on. Regala's belief that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender couples should be granted equal civil rights, as a matter of conscience shaped by her life experiences, her understanding of democratic values and her adherence to Christian teaching, wasn't up for debate. If such a perspective was unwelcome within her faith community,

then it was clear to Regala that she was unwelcome too.

"Referendum 74 is not about the Catholic definition of sacramental marriage," Regala said in a recent interview. "It's a civil rights issue and a legal issue. All couples should have the civil right and the privilege to make the same public statement of their love and commitment to each other. And one of my disappointments is that the Catholic church chose to insert itself into this battle."

In her official statement explaining her vote, she wrote that "what constitutes or has constituted marriage has evolved and changed many times over the centuries," citing the days when girls were married off in exchange for dowries. She reiterated that religious bodies would retain the right to perform only those wedding ceremonies that align with their beliefs.

She said that innumerable conversations about gay rights with constituents, colleagues, family and friends shaped her understanding of the issue, as has personal experience: She grew up with a gay brother and a lesbian sister, both now deceased.

Though Regala's parents were influenced to some degree by the stereotypes and prejudices of their time, they raised their children to believe that everyone is equal, which why she never listened to those who warned her, in 1968, not marry her husband, Leo, a Filipino. "God never intended for races to intermarry," one woman told her, disregarding the fact that interracial marriage had been legalized nationwide the year before. "That's why he made us different colors." Confronting discrimination deepened Regala's awareness of the ways prejudice and insensitivity can permeate social, cultural and religious values and mindsets.

Although baptized Catholic as an infant, Debbie Regala grew up attending Immanuel Presbyterian Church across the street from her childhood home, following her mother's faith tradition. The mission-style church with its distinctive bell tower is located just down the tree-lined street from the Catholic parish she would later attend as a wife, mother and grandmother. Neighbors included the Rev. Harold Long, the philanthropic pastor who helped Regala attend college after graduation from Stadium High School, and nuns whose collective presence made her consider joining a convent. Regala recalls that the pastor and the priest were friends who worked together to address social ills affecting their shared community. Her paternal grandmother, who also lived nearby, was nicknamed "Father Godley's Alarm Clock," due to her dashes up the rectory steps at dawn to make sure the priest was awake and preparing for Mass.

Leo Regala, in contrast, was raised Catholic and attended Bellarmine Preparatory School, an esteemed Jesuit institution in Tacoma. There, Leo learned that Catholic men and women have the responsibility to inform and follow their consciences, and even question elements of their faith tradition that may contradict personal beliefs or insights thoughtfully and prayerfully arrived at. Leo introduced Debbie to Jesuit ways of thinking about faith, public service and moral conscience that she found, and continues to find, inspiring and challenging. In Leo's words, "The Catholic church supports free will, and I was taught to question."

They were married as the Second Vatican Council was revitalizing theology and parish life. Over the next four decades, St. Patrick Parish was the setting for the sacramental moments that mark a family's life: baptisms, confirmations, weddings, confessions, blessings, funerals. Regala was an enthusiastic parishioner, serving as a lector, a member of the parish council, and a pre-marriage counselor, an experience that helped her "think about what marriage and lifelong commitment is really about."

Her support of marriage equality shouldn't have come as a surprise. Regala's public support of the LGBT community can be traced to 1996. In her second year as a state legislator, she vocally opposed Washington's Defense of Marriage Act. Around that same time, a friendship with Sen. Ed Murray, a longtime champion of gay rights and lifelong Catholic, was fostered. Regala remembers that she and Murray would attend Mass together when the archbishop was in Olympia, choosing seats front and center so that, despite differing views on

some social issues, it was clear that their faith was important to them and, in Regala's words, "they weren't going anywhere."

The first morning that Regala and her husband arrived for Mass at their new parish, the homily by the visiting priest, Jesuit Fr. Peter Byrne, couldn't have been more timely or applicable, Regala recalled. Byrne told the story of a beloved Quaker nurse who died at the end of World War I in a Polish village. The parishioners asked their priest if she could be buried in the Catholic cemetery, the only one in town. The priest suggested the nurse be buried just outside the cemetery's fence. The next morning, the priest discovered that the fence had been moved around her gravesite. Byrne later explained, "Now this all flowed from the Gospel text of Jesus always stretching the boundaries to include those who were outcasts. It is this moving of the fence ... that is the call of the Gospel."

The homily confirmed for Regala what she had sensed in the deepest part of herself: She was right to trust her own conscience. Christ didn't build fences. Neither would she.

[Julie Gunter is a freelance writer based in Seattle. A version of this story was first published at the Pacific Northwest news website crosscut.com.]

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