

Catholic bishops should view DOMA's downfall in a different light

Pat Perriello | Jul. 2, 2013 NCR Today

The Catholic bishops have reacted predictably to the Supreme Court decision to strike down the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). They have [condemned the action](#) [1] and said it is destructive to marriage and family.

It does not have to be this way. This predictable response is not the only possible reaction. I contend that there is a better way. There is perhaps a more Christian response that would help move the church into a productive re-engagement with the world and closer to the vision Pope Francis seems to have for the church.

First, what does the Supreme Court decision actually mean? It does represent a dramatic change in how the United States and its people view gay and lesbian couples. More than just the court decision, it reflects a veritable change in public opinion due primarily to family and friends coming into contact with gay individuals and discovering their humanity. So this is a big deal.

At the same time, what has changed for the Catholic church in America? Not much. A heterosexual Catholic couple who wish to get married will still go to their local priest, be held to the same expectations, and plan their reception of the sacrament of matrimony. No one is expecting or predicting that the Catholic church will be performing gay marriages. No one is asking the church to change its position on gay marriage. The rights of the church are not being infringed upon. Instead, it is the rights of gay and lesbian couples that are being affirmed. After all, it is not always the rights of the church that are at stake in every situation.

Little has changed in states like Massachusetts, which has a large Catholic population, where gay marriage is now legal. The breakdown of the family has not occurred. People have not stopped getting married. Families have not been destroyed. In fact, unless you are actually involved directly or indirectly with a gay marriage, you are probably not even conscious that anything different is taking place.

Keep in mind that this revolution in gay and lesbian relationships is about civil rights and fairness for those involved. It primarily revolves around equal federal benefits for gay couples, visitation rights at hospitals, filing joint tax returns, etc. These are all issues that are the proper purview of the secular government. They represent efforts to ensure that everyone receives equal treatment before the law. The church should applaud this development.

The bishops need to recognize that what has happened is not, strictly speaking, a religious matter. These Catholic bishops are hung up on the word "marriage," but perhaps they should focus on Catholic marriage and marriage as a sacrament. In this parlance, everything remains the same. Sacramental marriage remains intact.

What the court has ruled is that gay couples can choose to share their lives with each other. The church does not have to agree with those choices, but they do not have the right to prevent others from making the choices they do make.

Church leaders should consider a more conciliatory approach because condemnation is nothing if not discriminatory. It is a denial of the humanity and dignity of the couples involved. By accepting the reality of

where society is today, the church gives up nothing. Its opposition, on the other hand, is mean-spirited and changes nothing. Greater acceptance would project compassion and understanding.

The evidence is clear that acceptance of gay marriage is growing, even among conservatives and Republicans. It is difficult to have a child or loved one who is gay and not reach out to them with love and understanding. On an issue where there is little positive that the church can hope to accomplish, it would seem that the time to move on is here. There are so many issues where it is possible to have a positive and prophetic impact. I would encourage church leaders to consider focusing on issues such as immigration reform, reducing gun violence or protecting the voting rights of all citizens. The dangers of climate change might be another worthwhile area to ponder.

Remember: Everyone knows what the Catholic position is on homosexuality. Strong vocal opposition to the Supreme Court rulings is not necessary for others to know what the church believes on this issue. Remember that the church also believes in the worth, dignity and value of every human being -- and that includes gays and lesbians.

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[1] <http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2013/06/26/catholic-bishops-striking-down-doma-a-profound-injustice>