

Love is Love is Love

On certain days, following certain statements from the Vatican, I have wondered if there is a secret, hidden office in the basement of St. Peter's where a group of bishops meets on a regular basis to come up with outrageous statements just to see how far they can push the "ridiculous" envelope on certain hot-button issues.

Monday, March 15th, was just such a day. At precisely the same time when some individual bishops and bishops' conferences were discussing how the Catholic Church could extend an outreach to human beings in same-sex relationships, the official department in charge of "protecting" the faith issued a statement saying blessing such unions cannot now or ever be possible because human beings in homosexual relationships are intrinsically disordered and such relationships would be sinful.

They also made clear that Pope Francis "signed off" on this statement.

In my own imagination, I now know what it must have felt like centuries ago when, a few hundred miles from here, the Salem Witch Trials were successfully concluded with the burning of some female members of the community for, supposedly, practicing witchcraft.

I feel quite certain that the logic used to forbid blessing same-sex relationships is about as sound as forbidding two left-handed people from getting married, or two people with mixed eye color.

What I had hoped would come out of the Vatican by now is a simple statement that would say something along the lines of,
"Wow! We thought we had a full, complete, comprehensive understanding of how human beings operate and how human beings interact as sexual creatures. Boy, were we reaching way beyond our competence! Every time we think we've got it nailed down, something new pops up and we realize we've

barely begun to understand just how complex and complicated humanity is.

It's in just such moments as this that we are grateful that the Son of God made the extraordinary sacrifice to become a human being and live a life exactly the same as ours to show us how we can live and how important love is to every aspect of creation."

But such a statement would require a certain level of humility. And when it comes to speaking on moral issues, church leaders have long given the impression they have exclusive access to the mind of God on what's right and what's wrong.

To be sure, the Catholic Church has an extraordinary history of moral teaching. And part of what is most extraordinary about it has been its ability to continue evolving as new evidence comes forward.

But, quite frankly, it has also had such an overwhelming obsession with matters of sexuality that it gives the impression that absolutely nothing in all of the created universe can possibly come close to the good and bad of sexuality. Every sin in sexual matters is grave! (I'm not making this up. This was precisely the Church's teaching on sexual morality – and is still believed by many of our church leaders today.)

I don't know who first coined the expression, "Love is love is love", but it seems to best summarize what Jesus was teaching us.

Perhaps this latest statement bothered me more than some of the other pronouncements that have come out of various departments over the years because recently I received a "save the date" card for my niece's wedding – to her female partner. The card prompted me to send a note to Cardinal Cupich, which included a

paragraph explaining I had received the “save the date” card and would really like the Church to stop saying things against couples like this. That, in fact, for many of our younger people, this is exactly why they have abandoned the Church. It is because the Church first abandoned them. And contrary to the professed gospel of love, what they actually experience is profound prejudice, which provides cover for hateful members of society to verbally and physically abuse certain groups of human beings, sometimes even killing them, because they don't fit into the accepted norm.

Sometimes my friends ask me why I stay a priest in this Church. I do because I am also acutely aware of the good the Catholic Church provides all over the world, the teachings on social justice, the environment/creation, the role of workers, etc. that has provided such positive groundwork for systemic change here in this country and in so many places throughout the world. Unfortunately, the people who actually live and witness those teachings are themselves often treated as second class citizens. Women religious have a far better reputation for living the gospel than any random group of priests and bishops. When a well-respected columnist, Kristoff of the New York Times, writes about his travels to the far reaches of the globe, going to places of enormous poverty and injustice, who does he almost always run into? Bishops and priests? No. He runs into women religious spending their lives in service, working with the local population, trying to help people help themselves survive and move beyond their current circumstances.

So, to put it mildly, the Church is not perfect - and neither are any of its members. No big surprise there. And it is wonderful we still canonize imperfect human beings. Let's also reflect that in over 2,000 years, the Church has also had the wisdom – even though it claims the “power of the keys” – to only ever proclaim certain people were definitely in heaven. So far, it has never made a

proclamation that anyone is in hell. Bravo! That shows some sign of wisdom and humility.

When the Church is this myopic, it is not only disagreeable, it is life-threatening. Every time the Church makes any kind of official statement against same-sex unions, relationships, etc., it once again places in danger the lives of every same-sex couple throughout the world, providing refuge for the hate-mongers and homophobes who are prowling, waiting to pounce. That damning line of then-Cardinal Ratzinger about homosexuals being “intrinsicly disordered” is such a hateful dismissal of all gay human beings that it is hard to believe it comes from a religious person.

The bottom line: either we believe the gospel of Jesus Christ that the first and greatest command is that we love, or we don't believe it. But to claim it is our core, our touchstone, and then to exempt any category of human beings from that love is wrong: it is a lie and it is the groundwork of evil.

We are better than that. And if the bishops in those offices don't know that yet, they should probably swivel around in their chairs and speak to the people working at the desks around them, many of whom are certainly gay, and ask them what they think. Or perhaps, even easier, they should just look into the mirror and ask that same question.

We are long past the time of wondering if God created homosexual human beings. And way beyond wondering if any human being “chooses” their sexual identity as some kind of option, like deciding which pair of shoes to put on today. When the “official” Church issues statements like this, lacking in basic science, severely lacking in any sense of Christian humility and understanding, we cheapen every other important and positive statement in every other area of human endeavor.

I want to thank Patrick Reardon for his thoughtful and reflective column in the Chicago Tribune on Monday. And also Fr. Arthur Murphy for his letter to the editor on Tuesday.

It is past time for the Church to stop talking about matters sexual until it gets its own house in order, stop pretending it knows everything, stop obsessing over matters sexual, and re-discover the truth of the gospel. That or risk becoming a laughing stock, lacking relevance in the daily lives of countless people looking for healthy direction and spirituality.