

A response to Bishop Larry Silva of the Catholic Diocese of Hawaii

"I think people forget that Jesus was not crucified because he pleased everyone and said everything they wanted to hear."

The one who made this statement was absolutely correct. But he was wrong in stating the reason for Jesus in his inferred reason for Jesus's crucifixion. Jesus was crucified because he challenged the authority of the Jewish leadership and said things that they didn't want to hear. In fact he did things that directly confronted the way in which these institutional leaders interpreted Jewish law.

You might remember, for example, our reading from the Gospel of Luke last week. Jesus healed a woman who had been who had been severely bent over and crippled. Now that in itself is in character for Jesus; our sacred writings describe many healings that Jesus performed. But the problem here is that Jesus did this healing on the Sabbath and this caused the leader of the synagogue to be indignant, as Luke says. The leader insisted that healing was work and that Jesus had broken with the law – in this case, the fourth commandment. Jesus broke religious law and he broke with religious tradition. The institutional leaders of the Jewish community said so. Finally the temple leadership had had enough, colluded with Judas and the Roman government, and put Jesus to death. It was the temple leadership who were very unhappy and angry that Jesus he challenged their authority and broke with their interpretation of the laws and tradition. It was the institutional leadership that led Jesus to the cross for challenging their authority and not speaking and acting as "normal" people would.

When I saw the headline in the Star-Advertiser yesterday morning: "Catholics have right to defend beliefs, bishop says," I thought "Here we go again." These arguments were getting really old and I had no intention of commenting publically on them again. I had already had two op ed columns published in The Advertiser. Besides, he was w speaking to only other Catholics who were supposed to listen and follow him. And he was lobbying legislators; we all have a right to do that. So I was ready to read the quotes from Bishop Larry Silva and once again disagree with him silently because I expected that the arguments and Biblical interpretation of some are such that a great deal of authority is given to a few verses in the Bible – in some case, partial verses – that have been used to argue that same sex relationships are against Scripture and are a sin against God. I've been told there are as many as nine verses in the Bible that serve this purpose. That means less than we can count on one hand. I can assure you that citing each one of the verses can be contested by Biblical scholars, by clergy, and even by people in the pews!

But I expected more of the same worn arguments. I had seen copies of the Bishop's letters to Catholics in Hawaii and to our state legislators earlier in the week and pretty much knew what he had written. I knew that a significant percentage of Catholics disagree with the Bishop and perhaps the authority of the Catholic bishop's office might sway some legislators. I also knew that other legislators had already changed the way they would vote from against what is being referred to as gay marriage to being in support of a bill that provides access to marriage to those who are gay.

But then this bishop proceeds to lump gay people in the same group as those notorious sinners the prostitutes and the tax collectors, who exploited the vulnerable and continued with their sinful ways. Again, I could come back with a comment that nowhere in the four accounts of Jesus does he condemn gay people. Of course, the bishop forgot about the johns who kept the prostitutes in business and he forgot about those tax collectors that were honest and did not abuse their position. And then and unfortunately, the bishop brings out the metaphor of the sheep and goats, assigns gay people to the goat category, and condemns them to eternal damnation.

Ouch. Jesus said this where in the Gospels? Now Bishop Silva has taken to assign other so-called sinners to the goat herd. I suspect even Jesus thought there were some pretty nice goats in creation. After all, wasn't everything God made in creation declared "good"?

Then the Bishop moves out of scriptural and religious arguments and into the secular realm. As someone representing thousands of Catholics in this state, he makes some highly questionable proclamations:

- Allowing gays to marry would open up a Pandora's box that would subvert societal structure and redefine what the concept of normal is.
- Allowing gays to marry would cause our school textbooks to be re-written and force young students to decide whether they would ask a boy or a girl to the prom.
- Allowing gays to marry would curtail normal sexual maturation.
- Allowing gays to marry would mean that parents would be labeled bigoted if they raised their children as heterosexuals.

So Bishop Silva warns us that allowing gay marriage will subvert society, affect education and prom dates, redefine normal, curtail sexual maturation, and label straight parents as bigots. What the article did not print was that allowing gay marriage could lead to polygamy, marrying parents and siblings, and minors. The bishop does qualify marriage with minors as occurring only with consent, of course. Parenthetically, to carry the bishop's last horror one small step further, perhaps all of those Catholic clergy who had sex with minors did so only with the consent of the minor. Maybe that's why the Catholic Church – even in the Catholic Diocese of Hawaii – has been slow to act about the sexual abuse by their clergy. So gay marriage could lead to marriage with minors – parenthetically, with their consent.

I challenge the Bishop to show us the sociological studies that support his speculations about the corruption and undermining of society by gay marriage. I suggest that the statements the bishop made were nothing but scare tactics that would serve to escalate fears and negativity. They have absolutely no basis in credible sociological studies.

He then asks if those who believe that the creation of Adam and Eve and the revelation by God that homosexual ACTS are sinful would be allowed to continue with their beliefs. This is a hate the sin, love the sinner statement. We know how well that doesn't work. Or would those who believe as Bishop Silva need to be "re-educated" – shades of Orwell's 1984? Would those who believe as the bishop still be allowed to believe what "has been so sacred ... for centuries"? Would they be persecuted for following God's law – as the bishop writes: "the law that governs those whom God himself has created in such wonder." I guess that excludes all gays and those who support their freedom to marry. But that's only my interpretation of what the bishop has written. I hope he didn't really mean it as it sounds....

Let me remind the bishop that each state that has passed a law opening marriage to gay couples has ensured that those who believe otherwise would not be forced to espouse different beliefs or to act against their beliefs. But the bishop would certainly like to force his beliefs on those of us who disagree with him.

He then talks about the children of gay marriages, who would be deprived of a loving home and of parents who cooperated with God's plan in creating these children. The results, then of gay marriages are many: "poverty, more social ills, more juvenile suicides, and even more problems than we can imagine."

Again, I ask the bishop to provide us with the sociological studies that support his statements about the horrors caused by gay marriages. And I remind him that there are many reasons for these ills of society – from what I have read, none of those reasons found in credible research identify gay marriage as a reason. There are loving gay families who have, believe it or not, been active in the creation of their children. Gay families are, for the most part, economically comfortable and do not live in poverty nor do they contribute to the poverty in our society any more than do heterosexual families. Broken families and the divorce rates are not the result of gay marriage. I suspect we would have a hard time finding divorce decrees that list gay marriage as a cause for a marriage breaking. I have no idea what other social ills the bishop refers to – unless these ills are from the proclamations of those who call themselves Christians and think that God sends earthquakes, hurricanes, war, civil unrest, and other Acts of God as punishment for being open to gay people.

I also remind Bishop Silva that suicide among gay teenagers has significantly increased from anywhere between two and five times that of non-gay identified youth. The rate is not higher because these young people are notorious sinners. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tell us that the gay teenage suicide rate is higher because they have been bullied, denigrated, physically assaulted, and even killed.¹ Some have even been sent to “re-education” camps to have their natural, even God-given sexuality forced out of them. Let’s think about who is behind these actions. Other gay people? Or is it belief in God and what has been determined to be normal that is causing Christians to act this way?

So much for the bishop’s worry that “normal” people will be forced to be “re-educated” because of their beliefs.

Finally, the bishop expresses his concern that this issue has been framed as a civil rights issue and “that anyone who does not agree is bigoted.” He states:

Do not be led astray by such language, and do not allow yourself to be bullied by it. Remember, Adam and Eve themselves fell for the serpent’s manipulative promise that they would be like gods, knowing good from evil, if they just ate the fruit God had forbidden them to eat. The fruit might have been tasty at the moment, but it ultimately brought us all into a very sorry state.

Let me suggest that this argument holds no water with the atheists and agnostics in our society. Absolutely none. Would the bishop insist that they believe this story and thus believe in the doctrine of original sin? It also does not hold water with those Christians who do not believe in the literal interpretation of this story of good and evil in Genesis. And there are many of us.

Let me remind all of us that any so-called literal interpretation of our sacred writings is always filtered through the eyes and experience of those who read and interpret scripture. There is no such thing as Biblical literal interpretation or its synonym, a “plain reading” of the Bible.

The bishop finishes his letter with a call to action on the part of all Catholics to lobby their legislators, to encourage their friends and family to do the same, and to make a public witness of their beliefs (or his beliefs, as may be the case) by walking around the state capitol building while praying the rosary. But don’t not too many of you together, he warns, because that would require a permit for forming an assembly. Don’t forget those civil laws...

His final statement is an encouragement that “love is the most powerful agent of change. After all, God is love!”

¹ <http://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm>

Frankly, from his letter to Catholics, I don't read a lot of love – his or God's.

The bishop forgets that civil marriages are a matter of civil law. There are no marriages that take place in a religious community without the validation by civil authorities. Not even the Catholic Church can provide a legal marriage without the proper paperwork from our civil authorities.

What the bishop is insisting on is that our civil authorities not making any changes but that maintain the status quo because of his particular set of beliefs.

Let me just make a comment here about the Episcopal tradition. We believe that we are called to use our God-given ability to reason as we consider scripture and tradition. We do not take as God's truth anything we hear from our institutional leaders, including those that preach from the pulpit. Our institutional leaders encourage us to use our reason as we move along on our spiritual and faith journeys. This has been part of our tradition since the late 1500s and the development of Anglican theology. Of course, we have set of beliefs as outline in our catechism. But we are encourage to discuss those beliefs and articulate our doubts in our struggle to understand those beliefs and form our identities as Christians.

What Bishop Silva has written tells Catholics what to believe, and in his letter to legislators, tells them also what to believe. He writes that it is their responsibility to protect the constitutional right to religious freedom in this state. But the exemptions of the proposed law are apparently not good enough for Bishop Silva. He claims that this issue goes "beyond sectarian doctrine to the fundamental core of our human nature, to the way we are built and made." This statement in itself is problematic because the bishop's belief in the fundamental core of our human nature is based in his sectarian beliefs, which he insists be used to prevent gay folks from marrying.

Let me also suggest that we remember that, by substituting the words race or women or miscegenation (marriage between races), many of the bishop's arguments have been used to deny civil rights and human respect to other groups in our society. Once this particular battle is finished, one might wonder which group will be the next target of come Christians.

Let me also remind the bishop and other conservative leaders that they do not represent all Christians. They. Do. Not. They are not better Christians than those of us who hold different beliefs. We and they are different in our understanding of God, tradition, and scripture. Different. Neither right nor wrong. Episcopalians – most of us anyway – know we do not hold the entire truth about God. We might hold some of the truth, but not all of God's truth. We look for those truths through our faith and spiritual journeys, as we accompany one another on those journeys, and as we deal realistically with our doubts. That is what we believe God calls us to do.

So I respect appreciate Bishop's Silva's articulation of his faith, both personally and as one of the institutional leaders of the Catholic Church. But I also remind him that he also does not possess the whole truth of God, that he has no right to force civil law to reflect his particular brand of Christianity, and that he has nothing to fear as far as his civil rights to his own religious freedom are concerned. But I call on him to respect the rights and faith (or non-faith) of those who believe differently, to not escalate fear in the community by his unfounded accusations about gay people and their families, and to allow us the same civil rights that he insists on for himself.

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