

Same-Sex Debate: An African's Viewpoint

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The ongoing debate on the legalization of same-sex relations in Canada, offers the Catholic Church in Canada, a much-needed opportunity for self-examination and self-renewal. At the end of the day, the decision taken in Parliament Hill for or against same-sex relations, will radically affect the Catholic Church and the Christian faith in Canada for better or worse. This debate opens new challenges to the Canadian Catholic Church: fidelity to the Christian Gospel tradition, creating a substantial unity of faith and morals among Catholic faithful and the understanding of their prophetic witnessing in the public square by the Catholic laity.

The issue of marriage should not divide people today among the liberals vs. the conservatives or right-wing vs. left wing Christians. This categorization tends to blur doctrinal and moral discourse among Christians in North America. What does the Christian tradition teach about marriage? This is the fundamental question that ought to be answered with openness and objectivity. In Africa a family is understood as a wife, a husband and their children. There is a strong argument among African theologians that African Christianity should chart a new dogmatic and moral path in the face of the growing crisis brought on Christianity by Western secularism and materialism. Indeed, African Christian life, morality, family values and liturgy are very different from Western Christianity, but most Africans do not know this until they experience this radical difference through exposure to Western Christianity. However, there should be mutual exchanges between Christian traditions, especially between the North and the South. Just as the Canadian Church tries to support the African Churches and peoples in their struggle against poverty, so also the African Churches can help the Canadian Churches to recover their Christian roots.

One reality that has emerged in this debate is that the Catholic Church in Canada faces a serious crisis of leadership. Even though the Church hierarchy appears to speak with one voice on this issue, Catholic priests and laity speak with different voices. This could be interpreted to mean that the bishops and their priests are not on the same page on this issue and that both are not connecting with their base (the faithful). Many reasons can be attributed to this. It could easily be explained away as the result of a secular-critical culture that is opposed to institutional restrictions of any kind, but this is a weak argument. No kind of prevailing cultural current is too strong that religious authority and values cannot positively affect it. However, religious authority can only be credible in our times if it speaks with firm and clear-sighted conviction, boldness

and love. In addition, it must speak not so much by words but by deeds. Also in our times, Church leaders must be seen to be on the side of the people, not in the political populist sense but after the example of our Lord who identified with all especially those who were poor and forgotten. Church leaders must be fully involved in the joys and sorrows of the faithful.

Many Catholics feel alienated and abandoned by their Church in their daily challenges. Most of them are not known by name. The liturgy appears to be impersonal, formal and lifeless and parish life has become increasingly bureaucratic. The voices Catholics hear from their Church are often that of 'external' Church authority with whom they have no connection at all. The Catholic faithful of Canada are vibrant and strong enough to face the complex challenges of modern society; but they need a Church leadership that is courageous, faithful to authentic teaching and sensitive to the needs of the laity and the signs of the times. The Church in Canada should be one that constantly engages the social issues that affect the ordinary people, especially the voiceless minority. The Catholic clergy should be visible in the fight for the good of the poor and the marginalized and should articulate a social agenda and not simply 'react' to the social and political issues of the day.

I have heard some Canadian Catholics tell me that they no longer obey priests and bishops simply because of the positions they occupy in the Church, but rather out of love and affinity to them for what they embody in their words and character. This I perceive is a demand for credible leadership. Why is there so much hostility towards the teachings of the Catholic Church in Canada? Why are Catholic politicians not listening to their bishops and priests? Why are some Catholics openly opposed to the position of the teaching Church? This is not the case in Africa. African priests still command unquestioned respect and obedience among the faithful. This is however not a blind submission. The Africans obey their religious leaders because they trust them and believe in their orthodoxy. Obedience, to the teaching of the Church in Africa, is not simply based on the fact that a bishop or priest pronounced it, but rather that the people find the teaching echoing from the heart of their culture and in the Christian tradition.

This is the case with regard to marriage. The African understanding of marriage is just as profound as the Catholic teaching. Africans enter into marriage to raise a family. Marriage is not a human right but a vocation. Marriage in Africa is not based on natural law, but on the sense of community. You do not marry as an African because it is your right; rather you marry because you want to become more involved in the spiritual and temporal life of the community, through bringing new lives and integrating them into the community. Through marriage, an African writes the biography of his or her ancestors and writes his or her own autobiography thereby conquering death at the personal and communal life. Marriage is therefore a spiritual dynamics that revolve around the life of the community and not just all about two persons who love each other and wish to live together. Marriage is a covenant between two

families and not between two individuals. Thus the idea of a same-sex marriage, in African Christian tradition, will not make any sense. This is because it does not confer the right to have children through which the life of the community is sustained thus keeping the memory of the dead and the living concretely in perpetuity.

The missing link in the same-sex debate is the failure to appreciate the meaning and purpose of marriage. Christian marriage, in Canada, has for sometime been reeling under a lot of threats. There are many people entering marriages without intending to have children. In Africa, before couples solemnize their marriages in the Church, the priest usually will have them undergo a fertility test to be sure that they are capable of bearing children, because a marriage that does not have the capacity *ab initio* of procreation may not be considered marriage in a proper sense in Africa. The reality of marriage in Canada has long become reduced to the union of two persons who love each other in the way married life is lived. What we see symbolically is not a family but usually two persons (husband and wife). The family as the domestic Church that eats together, stays together, comes to Church together, prays together and lives together is long gone in many Western societies.

There are increasing numbers of heterosexuals living together without sacramental marriage and without children; those who enter marriage do not stay in it for a long time as a result of the high rate of divorce. Most second marriages -which are a significant percentage- usually entered into as a result of divorce, separation or death, are not open to life (children) even though one might argue that they sustain conjugal life. The sociology of marriage as experienced by the average Canadian home is one that is open to extension to same-sex persons, because children are not central to marriage and marriage has been reduced to the life of two persons who love each other and live together. However, a rejection of this new sociology will help renew family life so that families become what they really are called to be: a domestic Church. We have already devalued or rather redefined marriage in practice and same-sex legislation will only confirm that devaluation or redefinition.

There is also ambivalence on the morality of homosexual acts in recent documents of the teaching Church in Canada. Many bishops and priests propose that the rights of same-sex partners to live together be upheld, but that their union should not be called marriage. This is a great source of confusion. The teaching of the Church on why she condemns homosexual acts has not been brought out in some of these teachings. I think that the Church needs consistency in her reasoning. This reveals a crisis of biblical and dogmatic interpretations and their application to the moral life. Many Protestants Churches surprisingly have rejected the normativity of Scripture as the guiding light of Christian life, and adopted an extended exegesis, that speaks only of the unconditional love of God for everyone excluding the unconditional demand he makes on us to love him in

the same measure, by going beyond our self-centered aspirations, which is the root of sin.

While I think a lot of research and reflection is still needed in finding an appropriate response to the homosexual condition, there is the need to maintain doctrinal clarity in these times. It is better to suspend judgment than to propose a compromise stance that same-sex unions should be protected by law but that they should not be called marriage. In the same vein, one cannot admit that homosexual condition is natural and at the same time condemn homosexual act, which is similar to saying that an egg is good as long as it does not hatch into a chick.

The Catholic Church in Canada is at a decisive moment in her history. The Church has been very slow in her response to the cries of the homosexual persons until the gay right movement took up the fight for their 'rights'. The Church did not 'own' the discussion on same-sex relations from the onset. She dithered for so long. She did not also offer spiritual support to her Catholic politicians who were left without moral guideposts. In Africa, Catholic politicians usually have unofficial spiritual directors. This is part of the connection which should exist between the Church and the politicians so that the Church can help form their conscience and shape their understanding of their prophetic role in the public square. The influence of the Church cannot be felt in the public square if lay Catholics fail to live up to the Christian calling in their public duty. Canada is one country, where Christians are the leading persecutors of the Church unlike many countries in Africa where the Church faces persecution from non-Christian. It is Canadian Christians-not Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs etc- that are systematically destroying Canadian Christian heritage.

There is also the question of the random incidents of clergy sexual abuse, which are well documented in Canada and the United States. Most of these abuses involve clergy pedophiles, who have destroyed the lives of many young kids. The opposition to the Church's position may be a reaction against the abuse of young people by homosexual clerics; it may be an opposition more to the institutional Church than to the Christian message as such. A Church with a significant number of homosexual clergy cannot speak with credibility on issues surrounding homosexuality. In addition, one must note that our Churches have not aggressively pursued a serious pastoral support for homosexuals; many of them are still in the closet wondering when they will receive love and pastoral support from their pastors and fellow parishioners. What pastoral program/alternative solution does the Church offer at the highest level for same-sex persons who are struggling with their self-identity? What pastoral program does our Churches offer for the marginalized in our parishes and Churches?

In the final analysis, I believe that this debate offers the Church in Canada the opportunity for self-renewal. The question of Pope Paul VI is relevant here: "Church, who do you say that you are?" What is the self-identity of the Catholic Church in Canada? What does she represent? How authentic, deep and dynamic

is the faith formation of our Catholics and how involved are our laity in shaping the Church's pastoral policies and in their implementation in the public square? The Church in Canada has a golden opportunity for renewal as she searches for answers to these questions. The same-sex debate is a great opportunity for the Catholic Church (and all other Churches) to look inward and ask in what direction they are headed in the journey to our Father's house.