

Our Prophetic Moment

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Rarely does a day go by without another story in the news about the battle to redefine marriage. It seems like the battle is being fought on every front: in federal and state courts, legislatures across the country, city council meetings, schools from elementary to secondary, churches, neighborhoods and in families. It's a constant theme in daily news outlets and across the social networks. It's everywhere and it's intensifying.

The battle for the redefinition of marriage and for the full embrace of the gay agenda is everywhere because those who are driving it have, with an astounding degree of success, planned it that way. Their intent is to bring the battle to every corner of society, to every institution, including—and especially—to the Church. The Church, particularly the Catholic Church, is a primary target:

The chief opposition to gay equality is religious. We may conduct much of our liberation efforts in the political sphere or even the “cultural” sphere, but always undergirding those and slowing our progress is the moral/religious sphere. If we could hasten the pace of change there, our overall progress would accelerate—in fact, it would be assured.ⁱ

Many in the church wish it were otherwise, but the Church is in a battle that will not go away. The thought of where it is all leading and what it will likely mean for the Church can be unsettling and discouraging. I've felt both of those emotions at one time or another during the past few years. But recently, I've begun to see this whole conflict as a moment of great opportunity for the Church. I see it, fundamentally, as a time of testing for the Church, and an opportunity to honor God and love our neighbor by witnessing to the truth.

Why do I put it that way? First, because at the heart of the battle are two competing worldviews. The attempt to redefine marriage is, in part, a rationalization about homosexual behavior, which is simply the latest expression of the fundamental rationalization which is at the heart of the sexual revolution:

At stake in the rationalization of homosexual behavior is the notion that human beings are ordered to a purpose that is given by Nature. The understanding that things have an in-built purpose is being replaced by the idea that everything is subject to man's will and power, which is considered to be without limits. This is what the debate over homosexuality is really about—the Nature of reality itself.ⁱⁱ

At the heart of the sexual revolution is an attempt to suppress the truth about the nature of sexuality. It's an ideology, a collective deception to deny the nuptial meaning of the body and the procreative and unitive purpose of marriage. What makes the current fight so opportune is the strong, very public, and growing opposition to the Church by political and cultural forces.

This is an opportunity for the Church to witness to love. The modern world has disconnected truth from love. Sexual love is defined by feelings, passions and desires, by personal choice, without reference to the objective truth about the meaning and purpose of sexual love. At the canonization of St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein), St. John Paul II reminded us of her wisdom, calling her the "martyr of love," who taught us that "love and truth have an intrinsic relationship," that "love and truth need each other." He said, "St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross says to us all: Do not accept anything as the truth if it lacks love. And do not accept anything as love which lacks truth! One without the other becomes a destructive lie."ⁱⁱⁱ

The separation of truth from the meaning of sexual love is "a destructive lie." We cannot accept it. The challenge before us now is to love, to love God by honoring and giving thanks for His creative design and purpose in human sexuality, and to love our neighbor by giving public witness to that truth in love.

The question is, are we ready?

Meeting the Challenge

At the moment, it doesn't look like we're ready. By God's grace the Church continues to teach the truth about human sexuality, and we know, that by that same grace, the truth will ultimately triumph. In the meantime, the battle for the hearts and minds of the baptized rages.

If recent polls are any indication, Catholics' opinions about the redefinition of marriage and homo-erotic sex are moving in the wrong direction. A recent study by the Public Religion Research Institute found:

Nearly three-quarters of Catholics favor either allowing gay and lesbian people to marry (43 percent) or allowing them to form civil unions (31 percent). Only 22 percent of Catholics say there should be no legal recognition of a gay couple's relationship, in addition, 56 percent of Catholics now believe that sex between members of the same sex is not a sin.^{iv}

A shift in attitudes toward same-sex "marriage" among millennials (people born since 1980) is even more pronounced. A recent Pew Research study shows 70 percent of millennials in favor of same-sex "marriage." That's up from 51 percent in 2003.^v

How did we get here so quickly? There are many reasons, but without question one of the most important reasons is what we're up against. The forces set against the Church on this issue are

formidable; they're very well organized, well financed and totally committed to their cause. What they've accomplished in just a few decades is astounding. It may be the most successful propaganda campaign our country has ever seen. They set out to change the way America thinks about homosexuality and they are succeeding beyond all expectation.

I tip my hat to them. In fact I'm humbled by the clarity of their vision, their strategic plan, their ability to put boots on the ground from coast to coast, and their dogged commitment to sticking to their game plan. Our culture is changing on this issue—and many Catholics along with it—because a small group of smart, focused leaders produced a plan that gave direction to those who wanted to produce the change.

That game plan is laid out by Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen in a book called, *After the Ball: How America Will Conquer Its Fear and Hatred of Gays in the 90's*. The authors are both Harvard-trained social scientists who set out to “convert” America on this issue: “We mean conversion of the average American’s emotions, mind, and will, through a planned psychological attack, in the form of propaganda fed to the nation via media.”^{vi}

The “psychological attack” follows a three- step strategy: Desensitization, Jamming and Conversion. The first step is to “desensitize people to gays and gayness” by “inundating them with a continuous flood of gay-related advertising.”^{vii} The point here is to normalize “gayness” in order to begin to break down peoples discomfort and to soften the immediate “physiological reasons” for their resistance to the lifestyle. A compelling example of this is the funny, endearing, harmless, sensitive, disarming gay characters that have appeared in so many prime-time sitcoms during the past decade.

Step two is a form of “counterconditioning” that inserts an “incompatible emotional response” in a person in order to create an internal conflict or “emotional dissonance” that will “tend to result in the alteration of previous beliefs and feelings so as to resolve the conflict.”^{viii} In other words, jamming is a way of removing or stopping the “reward” a person feels when they are opposing something they believe is morally wrong. The psychological reward reinforces the conviction that one is doing the right thing. Jamming seeks to literally “jam” that feeling of reward by associating it with an “incompatible emotional response.” For example, those who oppose the gay agenda or gay marriage are depicted as bigots, haters, “crude loudmouths and assholes.”^{ix}

The ultimate effect is to “get the bigot into the position of feeling a conflicting twinge of shame, along with his reward, whenever his homo-hatred surfaces, so that this reward will be diluted and spoiled.”^x The constant labeling of those who disagree with the gay agenda as “intolerant bigots,” “haters,” and “mean-spirited people,” and associating them with racists, Nazi skinheads and the KKK are exercises in jamming. Nobody wants to be thought of in those terms. Jamming has worked like a charm, it's a potent weapon which has reduced multitudes to silence and has paved the way for the tidal wave of “conversions” documented in recent polls.

A particular expression of jamming has been directed at the Church with great effect. One way to subvert the teaching of the church and to remove the “psychic reward” some Catholics feel when they oppose homosexuality and the redefinition of marriage, was to find sympathetic voices of authority in the Church to cast doubt upon the veracity of Biblical proscriptions against homosexuality. It takes courage to stand against the tide of popular culture on this issue. When a lay person stands up to defend the Church’s position, and is then confronted by the words of a Bishop, priest, theologian or Biblical scholar to the contrary, it creates the same “emotional dissonance,” and subverts the “psychic reward” they should be feeling for defending the faith. Instead, they get jammed and reduced to silence, undercut by the voice of “authority.”

The final step in the game plan is conversion. Conversion makes use of “Associative Conditioning” by presenting “bigots” with pictures of people they admire or members of “their crowd” associating with gays: “In Conversion, we mimic the natural process of stereotype-learning, with the following effect: we take the bigot’s good feelings about all-right guys, and attach them to the label ‘gay,’ either weakening or, eventually, replacing his bad feelings toward the label and the prior stereotype.”^{xi}

This effect is produced when prominent Catholic politicians, athletes, entertainers, academics and even clergy are “in the picture.” Conversions are happening. Catholic “converts” are popping up each day, from Catholic Supreme Court justices to Catholic high school kids. Ironically, many are becoming positively evangelical for the cause, zealous to help change the mind of other Catholics who remain in the dark, “bigots,” who need conversion. The conversion is complete; the “psychic reward” is now fueling open opposition to the teaching of Jesus and His Church.

I’m challenged, sobered and convicted by all of this. The words of Jesus come to mind: “the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the sons of light,” (Lk 16:8). To be sure, there is more at work here than just smarts and good organization. This is, at its core, a spiritual battle. But that doesn’t negate the value and effect of strong leadership, clear strategy and total commitment to a cause. It helps to play smart, to be strategic, intentional, united, and committed.

What I’d like to do with the remainder of this article is to address some of the potential fault lines within the leadership structure of dioceses and key institutions that, if not dealt with, will prevent us from successfully facing this challenge. Much more needs to be done to reach a full state of readiness than what I propose here. But it is my hope that the following reflections and suggestions will make a useful contribution to our overall efforts.

Build the Church

Al Kresta, host of “Kresta in the Afternoon” on Ave Maria Radio has a mantra that captures our primary mission: “Build the Church, Bless the Nation.” His point is simple. Our job as disciples of Jesus is not to fix the world. Rather, we are to build the Kingdom of God. The Church, a living

sign of the Kingdom of God, is meant to be a “light to the nations.” The only way she can be a blessing to the world is to be that light, to be a distinct counterculture, whose way of life radically expresses fidelity to Christ.

Our first step in this battle is to “strengthen the brethren.” That requires leadership, clear, confident, visionary leadership from all those who are in positions of leadership in the Church, beginning with our bishops. We’ve been blessed to have so many bishops who are faithful to the teaching of the Church, and who are willing to speak up in defense of marriage and the family. But given what we’re up against we need more bishops—all of the bishops—to do the same.

More than ever, we need to see bishops who embody apostolic courage, men who are ready to engage this spiritual battle, head on, who are “willing to put their lives on the line, even to accepting martyrdom, in bearing witness to Christ.”^{xii} The brethren need to see leaders who are, like Jesus, “consumed with zeal for God’s house,” models, who can show us how to speak the truth in love in this politically-charged climate, and who communicate the urgency of the moment. This is the time to “preach the word, to be urgent in season and out of season, to convince, rebuke and exhort, to be unfailing in patience and in teaching” (1 Tim 4:2).

The brethren need to hear the truth, confidently proclaimed, again and again. There has been a systematic, unrelenting attack on the Bible, the Catechism and the teaching of the Church since the beginning of the sexual revolution. A great deal of confusion has been sown about what the Bible actually says about God’s plan and purpose for human sexuality. The teaching of the Church is clear, it just needs to be proclaimed with greater confidence, clarity, power, creativity and consistency.

Getting the message right is crucial. St. John Paul II’s “Theology of the Body,” is an important starting point. It can be a potent antidote to the lies of the culture. However, it must be presented in a way that is accessible to ordinary folks, discussed in small, well-facilitated groups and coupled with personal testimony by ordinary men and women who embody its teaching. That process has begun but much more is needed to make the truth it contains more accessible to a broader audience. We need a clear plan to teach this systematically, with the utmost dedication and commitment to unpacking all of its beauty to every age group in the Church.

Expect Opposition

As beautiful as this teaching is, there will be resistance. Bishops and senior leaders must train others in leadership to expect it. The pressure to suppress the truth about human sexuality is strong. Cultural and political forces invested in that suppression are creating a climate where open hostility to the Church’s teaching is acceptable. As Professor Robert George recently said,

The days of socially acceptable Christianity are over. The days of comfortable Catholicism are past. It is no longer easy to be a faithful Christian, a good Catholic, an

authentic witness to the truths of the Gospel...To be a witness of the Gospel today is to make oneself a marked man or woman. It is to expose oneself to scorn and reproach.^{xiii}

There is great temptation, in the face of such opposition, to avoid conflict by not addressing the problem. Conflict avoidance is an enormous problem. It is especially difficult knowing that a growing number of people in our dioceses and congregations no longer agree with the Church's teaching in this area. Momentum in support of the redefinition of marriage is growing. Catholics are becoming more vocal in their support of the LGBT agenda.

Clergy, in particular must resist the temptation to repeat what happened in the case of contraception. Because so many Catholics oppose the Church's teaching on contraception, it's rarely mentioned. The silence encourages dissent. It communicates a lack of conviction and nerve on the part of leadership, and the belief that in the end, it's no big deal. After all, if father thought it was a big deal, he'd say something, right?

We cannot allow the preaching of the Church to be cowed into silence. No! "We believe and so we speak." (2 Cor 4:13) We need to pray, to beg the Lord to increase in us the virtues of courage and fear of the Lord. We need courageous leadership, men and women who are "prepared to suffer injury and, if need be, death for the truth and for the realization of justice."^{xiv} The redefinition of marriage, the denial of sexual complementarity and the procreative and nuptial meaning of the body, is a lie. It is the denial of reality, a conscious suppression of the truth, and ultimately, it is a refusal to do justice to God and neighbor.

The Psalmist cries out, "Teach me thy way O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to the fear of your name" (Ps 86:11). The fear of the Lord is a lost virtue today. Few seem to understand what it means. To the modern ear it doesn't sound nice. We need to consciously cultivate this virtue among our people once again. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; it protects us against folly of walking in "our truth," and helps us to be rightly ordered to reality, to living in God's truth.

St. Paul said, "Knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men!" (2 Cor 5:11) Fear of the Lord leads to courageous proclamation of the truth. The fear of men leads to cowardice, timidity, silence, and feeling ashamed of the Gospel because it is rejected by those we seek to please. There is a great deal of "blushing at the Gospel" among the baptized, especially the Gospel truth about human sexuality. The fear of men reveals an inordinate love of self. We're afraid of the high cost of social rejection so we remain silent or accommodate our views as a means of self-protection. The great danger here is to love oneself in such a way that you actually lose your life in the end.

Leaders should present the witness of the martyrs: "And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death" (Rev 12:11). Teach us to not love our lives in such a way that we will lose them. Don't caress, flatter, entertain or pamper the sheep. Arm them for battle!

Take Action

If we're going to begin to turn the tide in this battle, to have real impact on our own people, we need unity of vision and purpose among our leaders and in our institutions of formation at every level in every diocese.

Beginning with the diocesan staff, the bishop needs to sound a clarion call, to gather his key leaders around him, and to forge a clear strategy for united leadership throughout the diocese. The unity and vision must begin with the senior staff of the diocese. The bishop must be unequivocal about the importance and priority of fighting this battle together, insisting upon unity in vision, message and execution. That means everyone on his team, leaders from top to bottom, need to be on board, willing to embrace the vision and teach what the Church teaches without reservation.

The bishop needs to set an example here for the whole diocese. Nothing undermines the church's mission more than a mixed message from the diocesan leadership. A house divided against itself cannot stand. A leader in either open or silent disagreement with this fundamental issue should not remain in leadership. Every link in the leadership chain needs to be strong. The opposition the Church is facing on these issues is strong and getting stronger. Our people have a right to the truth about what Jesus and His Church teach about human sexuality, marriage and family. Silence, direct opposition or even a muddled, accommodating message has a devastating impact in the current climate.

It is not enough for the bishop to simply "get his message out," assume his leaders will "get it" and if they are in disagreement with the direction of the diocese, leave on their own. That rarely happens and even when it does, it usually takes a long time. There is no time to waste, the battle has begun; time is of the essence. Instead, the bishop needs to be ready to confront any leader who is not committed. And, when necessary he must take action to remove whoever it is, even if it's a friend, an old seminary buddy, a person of influence or someone who has been on staff for a long time.

Gathering the Priests

Following the example of the central staff of the diocese, it is as important for the bishop to communicate the same vision, priority and sense of urgency to his priests. The priests need to know how important this issue is to the bishop and how he wants them to communicate it to their people. The pressure on parishioners to acquiesce to mounting societal pressure on this issue is going to make it very difficult for priests to teach and lead in this area. There will be opposition, push back and division. People will get angry, some will hold back their financial giving, and others will leave the parish. Again, the temptation will be to avoid the issue, to not rock the boat, in order to "maintain unity" or simply to avoid conflict.

Priests will need to know if the bishop is going to back them when they teach the faith without compromise, and when the going gets tough. What will happen if a prominent member or

members of the parish push back or withhold their money? Or if an influential staff member expresses disagreement with the Church's teaching on same-sex marriage? What will the bishop do? Who will he support? What is the ultimate and primary goal, to keep parishioners happy, to keep the peace, or to teach the truth in love come what may?

The cost of "hanging in there" with the Church on these issues is going to be too much for some, maybe even for many of our people. Is there enough unity and depth of trust between the bishop, the chancery staff and the priests in the parishes to withstand this kind of pressure? Ultimately, many priests, especially young priests, wonder if they will end up standing alone in this fight, or if they will be thrown under the bus if things get messy? As one priest put it, "I have to know the bishop has my back on this."

Getting the message clear is crucial. Priests will need some coaching, bullet points for homilies, and clarity about what the Church and the Scriptures actually teach. They need direction on what to teach and how to teach it. Dedicate a full day or two at the annual priest study conference to equipping priests to effectively preach in this area. Provide answers — accessible to both the priest and parishioners — to common objections to Church teaching. Not every priest or deacon is equipped to teach effectively in this area without help.

Parishioners need to hear a clear, positive and bold presentation on the meaning of human sexuality, marriage and family life. They also need to hear what the Bible and catechism teach about the consequences of refusing to live according to God's plan and purpose for human sexuality. The temptation, and the typical pattern here is to present the positive picture without presenting the consequences of rejecting that picture. That is a bad strategy. People need to know what is truly at stake in rejecting God's plan for human sexuality. Indeed, they have a right to know and those commissioned to preach have the duty to tell them. The stakes could not be higher; heaven or hell, eternal separation from God or eternal life with Him in glory hang in the balance.

Finally, priests or deacons who contradict the Church's teaching in this area or who simply refuse to teach it, must be addressed. The pattern of permitting "dissenting" priests to lead what often become "dissenting" parishes weakens the Church's voice. There is plenty of room for diversity of opinion on many issues the Church faces in her life and mission. The meaning of human sexuality, marriage and family is not one of them. It is absolutely foundational and leaves no room for compromise or accommodation.

Equipping Our Schools

The recent controversy at Charlotte Catholic High School over the content of Sr. Jane Dominic Laurel's presentation of Church teaching on human sexuality, marriage and family, provides an important teaching moment and wake-up call for all of our Catholic Schools. Among other things, it exposed the division that exists among parents, students, teachers and administrators on these issues, and made it clear that our schools, from our universities to our elementary schools are being targeted as key battle grounds for the undermining of the Church's teaching.

In this highly-charged climate, even small missteps can lead to big problems. There is no room for naiveté now. School superintendents, principals, administrators, teachers, coaches, school boards and key parent volunteers need to be of one heart and mind on this issue. The bishop and school superintendent should meet with the principals to communicate a clear vision and to form concrete strategies that will bring clarity, confidence and a sense of peace about communicating the beauty and truth of the Church's teaching.

Again, the bishop needs to know that his superintendent and principals are on the same page, and where it is needed, give one-on-one time with these leaders to hear their concerns, answer questions and to encourage them in their leadership. The principals need to know exactly what is expected of them and to know that they are not fighting this battle on their own. Principals who are not able or ready to lead with conviction on these issues will need additional support and training.

One important service the diocese can provide for schools is to put together an experienced, gifted and well-trained team of speakers who can serve as a resource "from the outside" to supplement the ongoing teaching of the theology faculty and campus ministry. Gifted communicators, who have the message well in hand, and who have been vetted by the diocese, can provide much needed support to the staff and teachers of the school. They can provide genuine "conversion" moments that help move individuals and at times the entire school community forward on these sensitive issues.

Creating an atmosphere of open dialogue with students, a place where they can ask honest questions is a delicate but essential piece of an overall strategy for helping students process and navigate their way through the cultural confusion in which they live. Young people are bombarded on a daily basis with propaganda about all things sexual, and with misinformation about the Church and her teaching. They are under almost constant pressure to get on board with popular culture. With a new "constitutional right" to same-sex "marriage" just around the corner, the pressure to conform will only increase.

Our students live in a world where their Church and school are on record as opposing in principle what the government, and many of their own friends, neighbors, coaches, employers, view as fundamental human right. Their peers in public schools will be subject to an intense propaganda campaign in support of these newly recognized rights, and those who oppose them will be demonized, characterized as religiously motivated, narrow-minded, intolerant bigots. The last thing young people want to experience is being considered intolerant, judgmental, unloving and mean by their peers. They will need all the help and support they can get from strong, compassionate and informed adults who are convinced about the Church's teaching. They will need to know why the Church's teaching is an expression of true love and compassion.

Parents will need help as well. From the time inquiring parents enter the school for the Open House, the message to them should be crystal clear: the school exists to make disciples of Jesus Christ. That means passing on to students the faith as they have received it, whole and entire.

Each family ought to receive at the Open House a bullet point handout of what will be taught about these hot button issues during their child’s time at the school. The principal or appointed staff member should encourage parents to discuss the material with their child, and offer opportunities to speak with teachers or staff if they have any questions. Finally, they should make it clear that enrollment will include a signature of consent by both parents and student that they have read the material and give their full support to it.

This is truly a moment of opportunity for Church leadership. It’s an opportunity to express radical love for God and neighbor. It’s a time to teach and lead, to teach by leading, to model for our people humble, passionate, intelligent, strategic and courageous leadership. May we who have been “clothed with power from on high,” (Lk 24:49) and filled with “sure hope” (Heb 6:19) rise to the challenge, and live as faithful witnesses to love.

ⁱ Paul Varnell, “Learning from Catholic’s Change,” *OutNOW!* 3:13 (June 27, 1995), 15.

ⁱⁱ Robert R. Reilly, *Making Gay Okay*, Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 2014, Front cover sleeve.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Paul II, Homily for Canonization of Edith Stein, October 11th, 1998

^{iv} Public Religion Research Institute, www.publicreligion.org, Catholic Attitudes on Gay and Lesbian Issues: Comprehensive Report from Recent Research

^v Pew Research Center, www.pewresearch.org, May 6, 2013.

^{vi} Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen, *After the Ball: How America Will Conquer Its Fear & Hatred of Gays in the 90s* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 153.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 149.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 150.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, 151.

^x *Ibid.*, 151.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, 155.

^{xii} Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24.

^{xiii} Robert George, National Prayer Breakfast, May 13, 2014.

^{xiv} Josef Pieper, *A Brief Reader on the Virtues of the Human Heart* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 11.