The fierce grace of stability
A story of discernment through hard times

Gerald W. Schlabach

It is counterintuitive, I know. If any single existential crisis helped me embrace the Catholic intellectual tradition, it was homosexuality. That would not be counterintuitive at all if I were the kind of convert to Catholicism who has clung to the rock of Rome as a bulwark of authority against the wiles of relativism and the wishy-washiness of liberalism. To be sure, I do share a certain disdain for both of these -isms. Because I found most arguments from both sides of this culture war unconvincing, I sat painfully on the fence for more than two decades. Just as fundamentalist appeals to the authority of Bible and magisterium are often heartless, vague liberal appeals to love, equality, and inclusion are often question begging. Ultimately, the arguments that convinced me to support same-sex marriage have actually been conservative ones.

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But I anticipate. As best I can understand my anguished journey of two decades, what happened is this: The puzzles of homosexuality loosened my confidence in Mennonite ethical approaches right when I was supposed to be coming into my own as a Mennonite ethicist. Yet the struggle to discern a faithful response to the issue deepened my commitment to actual Mennonites—especially a particular one, my wife.

One could name the formative practice of hanging in there with one another amid conflict and pain in various ways, but among these is the vow of stability by which Benedictine monks commit themselves to staying put in one local community for a lifetime. Benedictine stability gave me language for understanding the deep grammar of Catholicism—practices and background

assumptions that dispose them to remain together in communion with one another and their bishops even when they are pissed off. While it is often hard to sense Catholicism at its slowly moving depth, this deep grammar is what gives it qualities at odds with the rigid traditionalism that many zealous defenders and most cynical detractors alike see in it.[1]

The Gordian knot that I could not untangle as a Mennonite ethicist was this: Mennonite ethical thinking cannot readily admit the category of legitimate exceptions. Even traditional Catholic casuistry recognizes that any moral system must allow for these. However detailed the set of norms and rules one uses to lay out that system, it cannot anticipate every possible circumstance. Thus, the code of Roman Catholic canon law closes with a reminder that canon law itself always serves a larger purpose: "The salvation of souls, which must always be the supreme law in the Church, is to be kept before one's eyes."

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Mennonite ethics must avoid this move. In practice, wise Mennonites have always made common-sense exceptions. It's the formal category that's the problem. The legitimate reason: Mennonite pacifism. The paradigmatic issue of Christian pacifism has defined Mennonites' very identity, and pacifism as they have articulated it cannot formally admit exceptions. To insist that Christians practice disciplined nonviolence as a norm but allow for even the most exceptional of exceptions is to adopt a just-war position.

If Mennonites have sometimes deserved the otherwise unfair moniker of "perfectionists," this I think is why. It is not that their theology expects people to become perfect so that they might earn salvation by their works. Rather, the habits of mind and communal practice needed to sustain pacifism migrate over to other areas of moral discernment as well. Traditionally, every boundary between acceptable and unacceptable behavior in the Mennonite community has required negotiation. Boundaries might change or churches split if disagreement over boundaries proved intractable, but boundaries must be clear.

Obviously, a different approach would not have spared Mennonites every conflict over whether to include gays and lesbians as full church members or whether to bless their covenanted unions as marriages. God knows, other churches have struggled at least as much. But for many years I was able to find provisional resolution, thanks to characteristic modes of Catholic thought. Catholic moral theologian Lisa Sowle Cahill, for example, employed this approach to argue that the church ought to be able to uphold monogamous heterosexual marriage as its moral norm, while also acknowledging the moral integrity of those of same-sex orientation who approximate that norm as closely as they can.[2]

Eventually I made different arguments for extending the blessing of marriage to covenanted same-sex unions. So the point is not that this one framework could settle the matter for any church. But if the Catholic framework of norms and exceptions is only one resource for communal discernment, it is a telling one. On one hand, it maintains a bounded discipline that liberal Protestantism largely seems to have given up on. On the other hand, it keeps the necessary countercultural stubbornness that Mennonites need from becoming harshly rigid.

My journey into Catholicism has certainly not been solely intellectual, and my joy at encountering the long Christian tradition has not come from ethical puzzles alone. In the Jewish Talmud, apparently divergent rabbinical interpretations stand in a single canon, thus canonizing debate itself. Reading the early church fathers I found the church's talmud. Later, even when Thomas Aquinas offered Catholicism's great systemization of thought, the format was thoroughgoing debate. Every article of Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* first lists the best objections to what he is about to argue, thus honoring rather than expunging rival positions.

The result of taking this approach is not a free-for-all marketplace of ideas. Disciplining the debate are certain parameters, or what George Lindbeck compared to a grammar, as defined by accountability to ancient sources, especially the creeds.[3] Yet that accountability is hardly fundamentalist. This is the orthodoxy of a living tradition, not rigid traditionalism. Things change both too slowly for progressives and too quickly for traditionalists. The ballast of tradition may make women's ordination or sacramental

recognition of same-sex marriage seem all but unimaginable for now, but that same inertia makes the reforms of Vatican II irreversible. This is a global church, after all. Segments of the global church line up both for and against causes that globally minded progressives in the West champion. Changing *as* a global, multicultural people requires changing at a just pace, in order to stay together *as* a people.

My book *Unlearning Protestantism* suggests how the Benedictine practice of stability is writ large in Catholicism as a whole. To be Catholic at all is to persist with the church through good times and bad, despite disagreements, even when one is angry. For to do otherwise, even if one moves to another liturgically high church, is by definition to become Protestant. The necessary practice of staying together, therefore, nurtures virtues of fidelity and patience. At key stages, what attracted me most to Catholicism were exactly these qualities. Even some of the most liberal of my professors at the University of Notre Dame evinced a dogged loyalty to their church. The role model they offered helped me stay Mennonite for a long time. When I found I had to make the impossible choice between practicing stability by staying in the church that had formed me and practicing stability by returning to the church that had formed it, I at least sought to do so in a way that would strengthen bridges between communities rather than burn any bridge behind me.

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If I had not been married to Joetta, the plot of this story might have taken a different route toward the same resolution. As I began to explore becoming Catholic, Joetta began to explore ordained ministry. I took my own time, because Joetta had to be at peace with my becoming Catholic. I did not need to find peace with women's ordination; I grieve that if Joetta had ever considered joining me as a Catholic, Roman refusals even to discuss the possibility would have presented too great a hurdle. The topic of homosexuality, though, was often hard even to broach. It constituted the single most painful area of our marriage, and for months on end we often

avoided it. If I as an ethicist pressed for strong arguments, she as a pastor was taking care lest any "bruised reeds" be broken in her congregation (Isa. 42:3).

It is not that I ever wanted to exclude gays and lesbians from the life of the church. To me it seemed obvious that any spirituality of nonviolence must entail a commitment to respect the dignity and listen deeply even to those with whom I disagree. And that steered me quite safely away from homophobia. No, my hesitations were three:

1. As a Mennonite and as a Catholic I have yearned to see the witness by which Christian communities move together through careful discernment, precisely as communities, not through pressure tactics and power dynamics. If prophetic dissent sometimes plays a role in such movement, it will be most effective as loyal rather than bitter dissent, evincing love for the church.

2. Wide public advocacy for gays and lesbians has historically emerged along with the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s. That revolution has released people from unhealthy past repressions but often invited a sevenfold captivity to newly exploitive practices. So when rationales for new sexual ethics, gay or straight, has come with an individualism that has no ethical criterion for sex except that it be between consenting adults, I have dug in my heels. Likewise with appeals to marriage equality that skirt the question of what marriage is in the first place by begging the question, "Equal what?" (Telling me I risked being on the wrong side of history only deepened my suspicion that cultural assimilation, not communal discernment, was at work here.)

3. Thus, I did not so much oppose full inclusion of gays and lesbians as insist on better arguments than I was hearing. I needed time, a measure of pain, and a good conversation partner who shared my intellectual commitments and theological language.

But it was unfair of me to ask Joetta to be that conversation partner. Nor did she have the same luxury of time; to deliberate in the argumentative fashion of scholars could easily break bruised reeds. Her formative faith experiences came from watching her parents pastor marginal folks in a small mission church at the margin of the Mennonite church at the literal edge of the United States, in a small town on Lake Superior. In her marrow is a deep commitment to hearing the stories of bruised reeds traumatized by how their home communities and churches have treated them. For her—as Pope Francis has articulated—the person standing before her at the door of the church or sitting in the pew has a reality that obliges more than any abstract argument.

Thankfully, I found another conversation partner, whom I will call David, who offered both lived reality and helpful argumentation. David is a fellow moral theologian, former Catholic priest, gay, in a faithful covenanted relationship, who was willing to skype almost weekly over a course of many months. More self-consciously than I, he works from within the Catholic natural law tradition. That God created human beings with an ultimate good or purpose not of their choosing or "construction" is theological bedrock for David. He thus has deep respect for critics of same-sex marriage, because he sees them asking the right question: What is marriage in the first place? Unlike most advocates for same-sex marriage, David had taken this question on, thus providing me with the key I needed both to become an ally and to uphold respect for the deep and valid concerns of opponents.

David's natural-law language had given him a way to articulate his own struggle in coming to terms not only with his sexual orientation but with his need for intimacy. His story is his own to tell, but my impression is that the desire once haunting him was less for sexual pleasure than for the possibility of thriving as a human being through a deep, intimate, daily, lifelong relationship with another person. Both of us would insist that healthy yet chaste intimacy is surely possible for those who freely say yes to God's calling and gift of celibacy. But David had come to recognize that as a devout gay Catholic man, his decision for the priesthood had in too many ways been an attempt to fit into the only space available to him. That in turn had stifled the very capacity for relationship that Catholicism believes constitutes us as persons.

David's natural-law framework thus combined with his experience to provide responses to the best objections of Catholic critics of same-sex marriage. Above all, this approach meant naming what marriage is (whether straight or gay) and what sexual union contributes within a marriage to make it so: Faithful sexual union seals the bond between two people that in turn seals bonds of kinship. Kinship then extends networks out into wider relationships of family, community, and church. Marriage, with the myriad small ways by which a couple builds a life together, constitutes the most basic bond in our kinship networks, and thus remains unique.[4] While social conservatives rightly speak of family as foundational for society, marriage is first foundational for family. A couple that starts a family in the way that the church believes is normative must marry first, before trying to conceive, and will remain no less married even if they find themselves to be infertile.

The more we worry about sexual "burning," the more we should counsel and support the "better" that comes when people channel their sexual energy into the civilizing, virtue-nourishing, other-directed relationship of lifelong monogamous marriage.

David's argument gave me the linchpin I needed to affirm same-sex marriage. I had already come to believe that all sides might find unexpected consensus if they paid more attention to St. Paul's somewhat embarrassing remark about heterosexual marriage in 1 Corinthians 7, "It is better to marry than to burn." For Paul, the norm was celibacy for the sake of God's kingdom, and heterosexual marriage was the concession. Pastorally realistic, Paul was willing to make such a concession precisely on the basis of experience. He was willing to recognize the value of a *better* and not always hold out for the *best*.

The practical wisdom here for us suggests that we social conservatives need not worry that homosexuality (especially male) may correspond with a somewhat greater propensity for promiscuity. For the more we worry about sexual "burning," the more we really should counsel and support the "better" that comes when people channel their sexual energy into the civilizing, virtue-nourishing, other-directed relationship of lifelong monogamous marriage.[5]

My contention is that this resolution, though not now official Catholic teaching by any stretch of the imagination, is yet deeply

Catholic in its grammar and character. It takes both scripture and tradition seriously. It may stretch previous understandings of both, but it does so respectfully by attending to their underlying wisdom. It exercises reason by refusing question-begging resolutions. It reflects the best of natural-law tradition by taking reality seriously and seeking all that we can learn from ancient sources and from new experiences.

And it does all of this by staying in relationship even when it would be easier to dismiss some difficult or painful conversation partner.

Notes

1. See Gerald W. Schlabach, *Unlearning Protestantism: Sustaining Christian Community in an Unstable Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010); "The Vow of Stability: A Premodern Way through a Hypermodern World," in *Anabaptists and Postmodernity*, ed. Susan Biesecker-Mast and Gerald Biesecker-Mast (Telford, PA: Pandora Press U.S., 2000), 301–24.
2. Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Moral Methodology: A Case Study," in *A Challenge to Love: Gay and Lesbian Catholics in the Church*, ed. Robert Nugent (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 78–92. Cahill may now want to state her position in other ways, since many gays and lesbians chafe at being categorized as non-normative. Yet it is worth noting that at about this same time, in the early 1980s, commentator Andrew Sullivan, a gay Catholic and influential advocate of same-sex marriage, seemed to suggest that it would be helpful if his church would at least adopt some such framework. See Andrew Sullivan, "Alone Again, Naturally: The Catholic Church and the Homosexual," *New Republic* 211, no. 22 (November 28, 1994): 54–55.
3. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).
4. Note that such a view is fully capable of recognizing that procreation is the prototypical way that the bond of marriage bears fruit or is generative. But it also accounts elegantly for what makes a marriage a marriage even when a heterosexual couple is infertile.
5. See Gerald W. Schlabach, "What Is Marriage Now? A Pauline Case for Same-Sex Marriage," *Christian Century* 131, no. 22 (29 October 2014): 22–27.

About the author

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