AMERICAN CATHOLICS AND SAME-SEX “MARRIAGE”

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Although Catholic teaching opposes same-sex “marriage,” in America Catholics support SSM more strongly than do Protestants, and states with Catholic majorities are much more likely to regularize homosexual relations. Younger persons support SSM more strongly than do their elders, suggesting that support will continue to grow. The trends in American Catholic thought on this issue exemplify American exceptionalism, moralism, and growing secularism, and reflect catechetical ambiguity, equivocation among the U.S. bishops, elite dissent, and the lingering effects of the clergy sex abuse scandals and the birth control controversy.

The issue of same-sex “marriage” (SSM) is the focus of much social, legislative, and legal controversy in the United States. In such controversy the Catholic Church is typically formally aligned with evangelical Protestants and political conservatives in opposing SSM, but the views of American Catholics do not generally conform to this alignment. This study attempts to contribute to the understanding of this variance, and of the issue of SSM, by examining the views of American Catholics on this issue over time, as measured by extensive survey data. Bracketing this empirical examination are initial and concluding sections suggesting a framework for understanding why the Church teaches what it does on this topic and why American Catholics increasingly do not believe that.

Church Teaching on Same-sex “Marriage”

The formal teachings of the Catholic faith provide a useful, if not essential, starting point to clarify and characterize the views of American Catholics. As a metric, these teachings have the merit of being relatively clear, univocal, and stable. Part of their explicit purpose, moreover, is to articulate a standard, or canon, by which the beliefs of adherents can be clearly measured and understood. A brief review of the statements and principles that characterize formal Catholic teaching in this area, therefore, provides a helpful backdrop for understanding the views of American Catholics.
The Catechism of the Catholic Church, the most comprehensive official compendium of Catholic teaching, contains no clear statement regarding the permissibility of SSM. The Catechism does, however, include numerous teaching statements in two areas that contradict the idea of SSM. First, the Catechism presents human sexuality as properly and exclusively heterosexual, that is, consisting of a relationship of one male and one female. The physical differences between men and women are essential to human sexual identity and relationship. “Everyone, man and woman, should acknowledge and accept his sexual identity. Physical, moral and spiritual difference and complementarity are oriented toward the goods of marriage and the flourishing of family life.” (2333; emphasis in original) On this understanding, homosexual relations are “acts of grave depravity” which are prohibited under all circumstances. (2357-59)

Second, the Catechism presents human marriage as a social relation that is definitively and irreducibly heterosexual. The relation of a man and a woman is essential to the meaning and purpose of marriage. This is true not because of any consequential good that follows on sexual difference, but because the man-woman relationship reflects the character of God. “Each of the two sexes is an image of the power and tenderness of God, with equal dignity though in a different way. The union of man and woman in marriage is a way of imitating in the flesh the Creator’s generosity and fecundity.” (2335; emphasis in original)

A number of other teaching documents of the Church address the issue of SSM more directly. One of the clearest for our purposes is from the 1986 document, “The Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,” published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (9): “The view that homosexual activity is equivalent to, or as acceptable as, the sexual expression of conjugal love has a direct impact on society's understanding of the nature and rights of the family and puts them in jeopardy.” This statement joins together the two themes from the Catechism noted above, in an explicit rejection of the idea that homosexual relations are comparable to marriage.

The CDF’s 2003 document “Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons” asserts the same idea more forcefully: “There are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage and family.” In clear language, this document states that such unions are immoral in nature, so that the “legitimization of specific rights for cohabiting homosexual persons” is tantamount to “the approval or legislation of evil” (5). Therefore, “all Catholics are obliged to oppose the legal recognition of
homosexual unions” (10). Furthermore, where SSM is legally recognized, Catholics are called to refuse co-operation with the law, as a legitimate exercise of conscientious objection. In sum, this document repudiates the possibility of Catholic support for SSM in the strongest, clearest and most fundamental terms.

A brief systematic arrangement of ideas may be helpful. Just as marriage elevates natural sexual desires into an institution that serves the common good of society, so there is a corresponding hierarchy of disorder in the social management of homosexuality, in four stages. At its mildest, same-sex desire is judged to be wrong and disordered, a burden which makes the path to full Christian flourishing more difficult. The expression of such desire in homosexual acts or relations, at the second level, is personally sinful. It is more sinful than illicit heterosexual relations, because it is irreformable; though, as with heterosexual relations, culpability may (or may not) be very slight or even (as Always Our Children [US Bishops, 1997] suggests) nonexistent. A higher, third level of disorder would be implicated in rewarding or encouraging such relations by normalizing them in a social institution. (A fourth level, which has engaged many Protestant churches and pseudo-Catholic groups, would be the sacramental blessing of same-sex relations in a manner similar to matrimony. This question is not addressed in Catholic magisterial thought.)

In this progression, the harmful consequences (technically, the evil done) at each level increase, so that it is possible to articulate additional reasons to oppose higher levels. At the same time, the proscription of homosexuality, including its basis in same-sex desire, forms a constant basis for opposition to all levels of homosexual experience in Catholic thinking. It is not possible, in Catholic thinking, to hold that homosexual relations are wrong but personal same-sex desire is morally innocuous, any more than it is to hold that gay marriage is wrong but private homosexual relations are acceptable. The higher levels of disorder, in fact, represent most fully nothing more than increasing levels of social harm brought about by wider homosexual practice. Same-sex desire is an internal trouble for an individual; homosexual relations acts out that trouble in the lives of (at least, and usually) two persons; same-sex “marriage” generalizes it to a social disorder; and sacramental recognition of it affects eternity, distorting (the precise word would be “demonizing”) the relation of man with God.

In American cultural discourse on this issue, both within and outside the Catholic context, there is a tendency to separate the two catechetical themes indicated above, that is, to separate an opposition to homosexual practice from objections to same-sex “marriage.” Some
judge homosexuality itself negatively but support SSM on grounds of tolerance, though this view is rare. An opposite distinction is made by those who celebrate homosexuality but oppose SSM. This position is not uncommon among American political liberals; it is the view, for example, of the current American President, Barack Obama. A not insignificant class of homosexual activists known as “queer theorists” tend to agree with the Church that marriage is an institution uniquely ordered to heterosexual relationships; though for them this is a negative evaluation of marriage. For them, conforming homosexual expression to the middle-class constraints of marriage cheapens the liberation possible in same-sex relations. As we will see, a similar, less extreme view is significant for understanding recent trends among U.S. Catholics on the issue of SSM.

In practice, however, and in academic discourse, support for SSM is almost always associated with a positive evaluation of homosexuality, just as opposition to same-sex marriage in Catholic teaching is based on a negative evaluation of homosexuality. Dissent from this teaching among Catholics is, as well, almost always based on an evaluation of homosexual relations that is neutral or positive. For purposes of the empirical analysis to follow, it is enough to note at this point that, empirically, opposition to homosexuality, particularly the prevalence of principled or unconditioned opposition to homosexual relations, is closely related, both in principle and practice, to opposition to SSM. As we will see, the statistical correlation between these two opinions is above +.6. This permits a much wider analysis, because, while there is little available data on views on SSM, there is a much larger body of information on views about homosexuality. Since, substantively, to understand views on SSM it is necessary to understand views on homosexuality, it is not surprising that, statistically, to describe trends in views on SSM it is sufficient, in practical terms, to examine trends on homosexuality in general.

American Catholics on Homosexuality

Data on American opinion on homosexuality for this study are derived from the National Opinion Research Center’s General Social Survey (GSS). This survey has been administered regularly since the 1970s to a representative random sample of U.S. households. Funded in most years by the National Science Foundation, this survey represents one of the most accurate and reliable sources of information on the opinions and beliefs of the U.S. population on a wide range of issues. I used data pooled from 1972 to 2008, yielding 53,043 cases, weighted to
represent all U.S. adults, to examine trends over almost four decades. Since 1972 the GSS has asked respondents: “What about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex--do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?” The last response (“not wrong at all”) is generally termed “tolerance”; the first one (“always wrong”) could therefore be called “intolerance.”

Since the 1980s, intolerance of homosexual relations has dropped, and tolerance has risen dramatically, in the United States. Figure 1 shows the trend. Social intolerance of homosexual relations was high and rising through the 1980s; as recently as 1989, over three-fourths (76.8%) of Americans believed that homosexual relations were “always wrong.” Since then, the proportion has declined, but currently (as of 2008) well over half (54.6%) of Americans still express an unqualified proscription of homosexual relations. At the same time, the proportion of Americans who see nothing wrong with homosexual relations has almost tripled, from 12.9% in the 1989 period to over a third of Americans (34.1%) currently.

Figure 1 also demonstrates that Americans are substantially polarized on this issue. In any time period since the 1980s, only about
one in ten has expressed one of the two middle, or moderate, positions, on this issue; in other words, about 90% of Americans hold an extreme position on homosexuality. Moreover, the combination of a steep rise in extreme support with a smaller decline in extreme opposition indicates that Americans have grown even more polarized on the issue of homosexuality in the past 20 years. In the 1989 period, the ratio of intolerance to tolerance among Americans was a commanding 5.9 to 1; by 2008 that had dropped to only 1.6 to 1.

Figure 2
Assessment of Homosexual Relations by Religion (Catholic, Protestant, Other) -
Showing Percent Responding "Always Wrong"

Source: General Social Survey (NORC) 1972-2008. (N=53,043) Data are a probability sample of all U.S. adults.

Strikingly, in light of the teaching of the Catholic Church, Catholics in the United States express more tolerance of homosexual relations than do Protestants and other non-Catholics. Figure 2 shows the difference, reporting the level of intolerance among Catholics, Protestants, and Others. In 2008 about half of Americans reported Protestant religious affiliation; a quarter reported Catholic adherence. The remaining fourth, reported as “Other,” was comprised mostly of persons reporting no religious affiliation at all. In the current decade, a bare majority (51%) of Catholics has held that homosexual relations are always wrong, compared to almost 7 in 10 (69%) Protestants. This
difference is not a recent development. As long as data on the question have been gathered, Catholics have been less intolerant of homosexuality than have Protestants in the U.S. Further, the difference between Protestants and Catholics is growing, as the decline in restrictive views on homosexual relations has dropped almost twice as much among Catholics (21.5 percentage points) as among Protestants (12.8 percentage points) since 1980. This is true despite the fact that the “Other” category, which consists disproportionately of more tolerant ex-Catholics, has more than doubled in size over the same period.

**TABLE 1**

**Regression Models Predicting Homosexual Intolerance by Religion (Protestant vs. Catholic)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Unstandardized Coefficients</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficients</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
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<td>B</td>
<td>Std. Error</td>
<td>Beta</td>
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<td>.06</td>
<td>185.434</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Protestant/Catholic</td>
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<td>.04</td>
<td>.137</td>
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</table>

*a Dependent Variable: Homosexual Relation Always Wrong, or Not*

**Model 2: Protestant/Catholic Difference with Seven Controls**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Unstandardized Coefficients</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficients</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>B</td>
<td>Std. Error</td>
<td>Beta</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>(Constant)</td>
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<td>.016</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Protestant/Catholic</td>
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<td>.05</td>
<td>.130</td>
</tr>
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<td>AGE OF RESPONDENT</td>
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<td>.000</td>
<td>-.055</td>
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<td>RESPONDENTS SEX</td>
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<td>HOW OFTEN ATTENDS RELIGIOUS SERVICES</td>
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<td></td>
<td>RESPONDENTS INCOME</td>
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<td>.024</td>
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<td>.001</td>
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<td>MARRIED OR NOT</td>
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<td>.005</td>
<td>-.074</td>
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Views on homosexuality are known to be affected by many things besides religious affiliation, such as age, gender, education, marital status, and religiosity. It may be that the difference between Protestants and Catholics on this issue reflects the differential influence of one or more of these or some other factor. In such a case, the apparent Protestant/Catholic difference would be explained by some other social factor, for example, by the fact that Protestants tend to attend church less often, or that they are more concentrated in the Southern region of the United States.
To see whether this might be the case, I examined the effect of seven possible confounding factors on the strength of the Protestant/Catholic difference on homosexual intolerance. Table One presents the findings. The table presents two statistical models of homosexual intolerance produced by ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis. Model 1 presents the effect of Protestant versus Catholic affiliation on homosexual intolerance. The unstandardized coefficient of .133 indicates that Protestants are 13.3% more likely than Catholics are to respond that homosexual relations are always wrong. In other words, this statistic reports, more precisely, what is presented graphically in the difference between the top two lines of Figure 7B. Model 2 presents the same effect after introducing seven other factors as statistical controls: age, sex, income, education, region, marital status (married vs. not married), and church attendance. All of these controls are known to affect views on homosexuality. Confirming this, in Model 2 all of these variables have a statistically significant effect, as demonstrated by the lack of standard errors in any of the accompanying t-tests. After including all seven of these variables, however, the difference between Protestants and Catholics, indicated by the coefficient of .129, is virtually unchanged. Even in the presence of these controls, Protestants are still 12.9% more likely than Catholics to hold that homosexual relations are always wrong. The difference between Protestants and Catholics in the United States, therefore, appears to be a genuine difference grounded in these two religions or religious cultures.

Young people in all settings tend to be more tolerant of homosexual relations and SSM than older ones, so the trend toward tolerance reflects not only cultural shifts but also a demographic one, as younger, more tolerant cohorts enter the population and older, less tolerant ones die off. Catholics, with higher retention and somewhat larger families, feel the effect of cohort replacement more strongly, which may explain, in part, why the Protestant-Catholic difference has about doubled since the 1980s.
Figure 3 demonstrates the effect of cohort replacement for Catholics only, showing intolerance by age for each of the past four decades. This roughly decomposes the overall trend into the cultural and demographic components. Comparing bars at each decade in time shows the effect of age differences. In the current decade, for example, the 50.9% of Catholics who responded that homosexual relations are always wrong consisted of only 36% of Catholics aged 20-29, but more than twice that proportion (57%) of Catholics age 60 or over. This pattern—that younger persons are generally less intolerant than older ones—can easily be seen to hold true for all four decades.

Comparing the same age category across decades shows the period or cultural trend. Among Catholics in their twenties, for example, intolerance dropped from 65% in the 1980s, to 49% in the 1990s, to 36% in the 2000s. In this way it can be observed that each age group also declined in intolerance over the three decades of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s.

Both of these effects, but particularly the demographic effect, suggest that intolerance of homosexuality will continue to drop among American Catholics. The age-specific trend of decline in intolerance shows no indication of reversing, although it is possible it could, as it did from the 1970s to the 1980s among most age groups. Even if it did reverse, however, unless the change were very dramatic, overall intolerance of homosexuality among Catholics would continue to drop for up to several decades, as today’s more tolerant younger cohorts worked their way through the population.
American Catholics on Same-sex Marriage

In addition to asking about homosexual relations, in four annual surveys—1988, 2004, 2006, and 2008—the GSS included a specific question about same-sex marriage. The item asked: “Do you agree or disagree? Homosexual couples should have the right to marry one another.” Possible responses were strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree.

Figure 4 shows the proportions that agreed and disagreed in each year. In the figure, the percent “Agree” is the sum of those responding “strongly agree” and “agree”; the percent “Disagree” is the sum of “disagree” and “strongly disagree”.

Figure 4 demonstrates that, as with homosexual tolerance, support for same-sex marriage has risen substantially in the past 20 years. In 1988, 73% of Americans disagreed that homosexual couples should have the right to marry; by 2008 this proportion had dropped to 48%. Over the same two decades the percentage who agreed with homosexual marriage rose from 12% to 39%.

Taking the ratio of agreement to disagreement (that is, the odds on agreement) as an indicator of net support, support for same-sex marriage was five times larger in 2008 than it was in 1988. This is larger than the increase in homosexual tolerance, which, by the corresponding measure, grew 3.7 times over the same period.2

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Figure 4
"Homosexuals should have the right to marry"
(In Percent)

![Bar chart showing percentage of agreement and disagreement from 1988 to 2008.](chart.png)

Source: General Social Survey (NORC) 1972-2008. Data are probability samples of U.S. adults.
As discussed above, there is a general, though not perfect, correspondence between views on the permissibility of homosexual relations and the permissibility of same-sex marriage. On the GSS the statistical correlation between them is .61. The question of institutionalizing relationships based on homosexual relations is distinct enough from the question of the validity of homosexual relations themselves to permit persons, without assuming a logical contradiction, to hold that the one is permissible while the other is not. For example, one may be personally opposed to homosexual relations, but support the possibility of marriage for those who engage in them on grounds of religious tolerance. This position might see a religiously-derived proscription of homosexual relations as a personal belief, not to be imposed on others in a free society, in much the same manner that many politicians express personal opposition to abortion while supporting its legal availability.

Figure 5 shows the range of such possible positions in the U.S. population, comparing 1988 to 2008. With regard to same-sex marriage, this view can be termed intolerant but supportive (IBS). On the other hand, one may see nothing wrong with homosexual relations as a personal choice, but oppose the institutionalization of same-sex marriage on grounds that marriage is properly a heterosexual institution. This is the position of the current U.S. president, Barack Obama, and is also the view, noted above, of queer theorists and activists. This view may be termed tolerant but unsupportive (TBU).
As Figure 5 shows, these views are present in small minorities of the U.S. population. In 2008 11.4% of those holding that homosexual relations are always wrong nevertheless agreed that homosexual persons should be permitted to marry (the IBS view). On the other hand, 10.9% of those holding that homosexual relations are not wrong at all nevertheless disagreed that homosexual persons should be permitted to marry (the TBU view). Far larger proportions of persons holding distinct views on homosexual tolerance expressed what might be considered the more consistent positions of both intolerance of homosexual relations and opposition to same-sex marriage (IO; 80.2% of intolerant persons), and both tolerance of homosexual relations and support for SSM (TS; 75.9% of tolerant persons).

Comparing the 1988 and 2008 figures reveals several notable trends. In the past 20 years, support for SSM has grown (or opposition has lessened) among all four categories of positions on the relation of homosexual tolerance to SSM. No matter what view of homosexuality or understanding of marriage they express, Americans are more likely to support SSM today than they were two decades ago. Of the two minority positions on both SSM and homosexuality, the one leading to support for SSM (the IBS view) has grown since 1988, more than doubling in the proportion (adding 6.4 points) of homosexually intolerant persons holding it, while the TBU views has shrunk by a similar proportion (7.5 points) among homosexually tolerant persons. The decline of these two discordant positions is also evidenced by an increase in the correlation between homosexual tolerance and support for SSM more generally, from .53 in 1988 to .69 in 2008. Overall, views on homosexual tolerance and on SSM are becoming more aligned in American thinking. But while academic discourse often focuses on the growth of those who say homosexuality is wrong but support SSM on grounds of political neutrality (the IBS view), Figure 10 makes clear that the main movement toward conformity of these two sets of opinions has been the much larger increase of those who say homosexuality is not wrong and also permit SSM (the TS view). In 1988 only a minority (46.3%) of those who thought there is nothing wrong with homosexual relations also supported the permissibility of SSM; by 2008 this proportion had risen to over three-quarters (75.9%). This may explain why support for SSM has risen even faster than has general tolerance of homosexuality.

When we recall that, over the same period, the proportion of those expressing unconditional tolerance for homosexual relations almost tripled (rising from 12.9% to 34.1% of Americans), we can see that the rise of acceptability of SSM among Americans with a distinct view has been driven by two ideological changes: the rise of the view
that homosexual relations are innocuous in themselves, and a changing understanding of marriage as a social arrangement that is compatible with homosexual relationships. Both of these changes are necessary to explain the rapidly rising support for SSM among Americans; either of them, without the other, would not lead to substantial increased social acceptance of SSM.

Social acceptance of SSM has risen more strongly in the past two decades among Catholics than among other major religious options in the U.S. Figure 6 partitions disagreement with SSM by Protestant and Catholic affiliation. Persons who are neither Protestant nor Catholic (“Other”), most of whom have no religious affiliation at all, are also reported for context. The pattern of SSM opposition by religion is similar to that for opposition to homosexuality: Protestants are most opposed, Others are least opposed, and Catholics are in the middle. For simplicity the figure reports only percent disagreement; the trend for percent agreement is similar.

Figure 6
"Homosexuals should have the right to marry"
Comparing Protestants and Catholics
(Perc ent W ho D isagree )

Source: General Social Survey (GSS), 1972-2008. (N=5,304) Data are a probability sample of all U.S. adults.
In 1988, only seven percentage points separated the level of disagreement reported by Protestants and Catholics. Since then opposition to SSM from Protestants and Others has dropped by 17 points (from 78.6% to 60.9%) and 22 points (from 51.8% to 29.1%) respectively, while Catholic opposition has dropped by over 30 points (from 70.7% to 39.2%). As a result, by 2008 the proportion of Catholics opposing SSM was over 21 percentage points lower than the corresponding proportion of Protestants; by then, Catholics had become more similar to “Other” religious options in supporting SSM than they were to Protestants in opposing it.

As with homosexual tolerance generally, Catholic opposition to SSM dropped much more than Protestant opposition regardless of how active persons were in their religion, as measured by church attendance. Figure 7 shows the data. Among both weekly attendees and those who attend less often, the decline in opposition for Catholics opposing SSM was over 10 percentage points higher than the corresponding decline among Protestants. Although Catholic doctrine is clearer and more restrictive regarding SSM than that of many Protestant denominations, increased
worship activity appears to have no effect on opposition to SSM among Catholics, which is declining much faster than among Protestants.

One factor that is strongly associated with the Protestant/Catholic difference on this issue is age. As Figure 8 shows, Protestants have higher opposition to SSM than do Catholics in all age groups, but the difference between them is much larger among younger persons than it is among older ones. Protestants under age 40 report opposition to SSM that exceeds that of Catholics of the same age by 23 percentage points; among persons age 60 or over, the difference drops to only 12 percentage points. In the context of a general social trend toward the acceptability of SSM, younger Catholics have much more susceptibility, or lower resistance, than do younger Protestants.

These issues are, of course, not merely abstract or academic concerns. Controversial legal and political initiatives for or against the institution of SSM are a regular, almost daily, feature of American civic discourse. Almost all of these controversies play out in state and local settings. To date, U.S. courts that have addressed the question have been
inclined toward permitting homosexuals to marry, while voters, from local initiatives to the U.S. Congress, have been inclined to keep marriage a heterosexual institution. In this context, the presence or absence of majority opinion opposed on principle to SSM takes on particular political significance. As Figure 9 shows, between 2006 and 2008, U.S. opinion on this issue crossed an important line, as opposition to SSM, for the first time, dropped below the politically relevant majority threshold. The crossing of this line may suggest one reason why, after a long string of voter initiatives supporting the traditional heterosexual understanding of marriage, several recent legislative efforts have gone the other way, in regularizing or providing support for same-sex marriages or civil unions; it also suggests that, as opposition declines further, such voter efforts in support of SSM will be even more successful in the future.

Figure 9
"Homosexuals should have the right to marry"
Showing Protestants, Catholics, and All
(Percent Who Disagree)

Consistent with what we have seen throughout this study, Figure 9 also demonstrates that Protestants retain substantially higher opposition to SSM than do Catholics. Catholics have not had a majority opposing SSM in this century; but even by 2008, Protestants retained a
substantial majority (61%) expressing opposition to SSM. Since Catholics and Protestants are concentrated in different state and local settings, this substantial difference in opposition suggests, as a hypothesis, that efforts for the institutionalization of SSM are more likely to be successful in areas of Catholic concentration, but are more likely to fail in areas of Protestant concentration. Only time will tell if this is true as a general rule, but preliminary analysis of state initiatives suggest that, to date, it has been more true than not.

Figure 10 presents the relevant data. This figure shows the level of public opinion supporting and opposing SSM (shown by circles) and civil unions (shown by triangles), and the legal status of such institutions, in each of the fifty United States. States are listed from highest to lowest support for civil unions, which correlates strongly with support for SSM. The star on each line also indicates the proportion of the state’s population that is Roman Catholic. While there is a great deal of variation, it is evident by inspection that the states with the highest proportions of Catholics in the population are also generally the states with highest support for (or lowest opposition to) SSM and civil unions. Of the eight states with the highest levels of support for civil unions, seven have a concentration of Catholics higher than the U.S. average. Six of these eight states have already recognized either SSM or homosexual civil unions. By contrast, none of the eight states with the lowest levels of support for civil unions have a high concentration of Catholics. Located in the Southern Bible Belt, these states are overwhelmingly Protestant, with only a marginal proportion of Catholics.
The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, as well as most local dioceses, has engaged in a number of initiatives to educate and mobilize Catholics to support the retention of the norm of heterosexual marriage in the political arena. These results suggest that such efforts have largely been ineffective, if not counterproductive. Indeed, as Figure 10 demonstrates, one of the more salient (though not perfect) predictors of the adoption of SSM or homosexual civil unions in a state is the possession of a large proportion of Catholics in the
population. States with higher proportions of Protestants are much more resistant to institutionalizing homosexual relations. This result simply reflects in political terms the substantially higher opposition to homosexual relations, and the institution of homosexual marriage, in the reported opinions of Protestants compared to Catholics. The political resistance of Catholics to SSM is low, not because of a failure to mobilize Catholics in support of their beliefs, but because Catholics, in substantial numbers, have not come to share or believe what the Church believes and teaches on this issue.

Conclusion

On the question of same-sex “marriage” (SSM), American Catholics are caught between the contrary pulls of the formal teachings of their faith and the prevailing norms of a largely secular culture. These contrasting forces are by no means new or unique to this issue. A tension between the Catholic impulse toward centralized authority and the American valuation of individual freedom and democratic governance has strained the relationship of American Catholics with both their faith and their country since the founding of America. From liberal impulses at the time of the American Revolution to the conservative reaction after the fall of Napoleon, to the modernist controversy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the effect of the Second Vatican Council, this tension has been an enduring feature of American Catholic life. There are today few issues of public consequence—such as abortion, schooling, unions, holy days, or religious displays—on which Catholic teaching or sensibilities are not at some degree of variance from American principles or sensibilities (which are themselves admittedly diverse and fluid). Historian Jay Dolan goes so far as to suggest that being “American and Catholic represent two souls, two strivings,” analogous to being American and black.6

The cultural dilemma of American Catholics is particularly intense regarding SSM, since this issue has become the focus of a large number of contradictory intellectual commitments and competing social influences. On the one hand, Catholic teaching is clear that marriage is, by definition, a heterosexual institution, and that civil law should support, and if necessary, protect this good of marriage. On the other hand, rising tolerance of homosexuality and the ideal of civic toleration, focused in a reluctance to impose sectarian religious ideals on those who do not share them, lead to increased social pressure to concede Church teaching in this area. Questions of whether marriage is properly a religious sacrament or civic institution, as well as the extent to which
these senses can be severed, complicate the issue further, as does the formal separation of church and state guaranteed by the United States Constitution.

The evidence reviewed in this study demonstrates clearly that, in this tension between an intolerant fidelity and a tolerant infidelity on the issue of SSM, American Catholics are steadily moving toward the latter. A full exploration of the religious and cultural forces that motivate this trend lies beyond the limits of this study. However, a few reflections on the present findings suggesting some probable influences can be offered briefly in conclusion, as observations and as theses for further consideration.

First, while the trend among American Catholics is toward defection on this issue, it is notable that a higher level of defection was attained long ago by most people under the influence of Western culture. The conflicts facing American Catholics reflect cultural currents that, as we have seen, flow even more strongly through Western culture at large. Americans, often noted as exceptionally religious when compared to most of the West, are more conservative on the issue of SSM than almost any other Western nation. The declining conservatism in America may reflect its increasing integration in a larger global social-religious order that is fundamentally secular, in line with those social trends that are often discussed under the headings of globalization or secularization. This may explain, in part, why U.S. adherents of Catholicism, a religion that transcends national boundaries based on a global “catholic” orientation, are less resistant to SSM than are U.S. Protestants.

Indeed, in many Western nations homosexual marriages or marriage-like relationships are fully accepted in the civil sphere. The fact that the issue of SSM is conflictual at all in the United States reflects another exceptional feature of American public life: that Americans approach their civic structures with certain moral or religious expectations. Despite (or perhaps because of) the formal separation of church and state, Americans generally subscribe to a kind of civil religion, which legitimates, at least in part, their political arrangements. This sense, too, may be declining, although the nature of the conflict on SSM suggests otherwise. Calls for religious groups to cede the definition of marriage to secular authorities have gained no traction to date, and no popular initiative has approved—and many have rejected—SSM in American states and local jurisdictions.

On this issue America remains, as Chesterton famously noted, a nation with the soul of a church.

Chesterton might have added that the church of America’s soul is Protestant, not Catholic. In many ways the obverse of the cultural
dilemma of American Catholics is a strong cultural and social structural affinity between the nation founded on revolution and the religion founded on protest. The sense of Protestant entitlement in America (familiar to any Catholic who has, in effect, paid twice to send his or her child to a Catholic school) may also help explain the higher opposition to SSM, as a secular civic innovation, among Protestants, particularly doctrinally orthodox Protestants, than among Catholics.

An important part of the construction of American Catholic opinion on Church teaching on SSM has been the influence of elite Catholic academics who function as a kind of anti-magisterium in articulating and legitimizing dissenting opinion. Indeed, regarding the Church’s opposition to gay marriage, Charles Curran accurately notes: “Many contemporary Catholic moral theologians have disagreed and called for a change in the existing hierarchical teaching.” Meanwhile, both the credibility and the clarity of the authentic magisterium have been impaired on matters of homosexuality. In the past decade, the clergy sex abuse scandals and attendant publicity revealed that many Catholic bishops and seminaries had for some time tolerated homosexual activity, at a level which suggested that they did not themselves accept the teaching of the Church on this question.

Equivocation and contradiction over the past several decades, particularly among the U.S. bishops, has also undermined somewhat the magisterial teaching regarding homosexuality.

Although other curial documents address the issue, there is (as noted above) no mention of SSM in the *Catechism*, often the only source of doctrine familiar to American Catholics. On homosexuality more generally, while the *Catechism* has consistently proscribed homosexual sex activity, its position has changed in small but substantive ways in recent years. The original (1992) edition of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (2358) declared: “[Homosexual persons] do not choose their homosexual condition; for most of them it is a trial.” In 1998 this was revised to read: “This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial.” The declarative clause stating that homosexuality is not chosen was intentionally dropped in recognition of the fact that the origin of homosexual attraction was not a settled empirical question. In introducing the modification, Cardinal Ratzinger commented, “We have left room for all the hypotheses on the origin of the homosexual tendency—whether it is innate or developed under certain circumstances.” For similar reasons it is possible to trace a trend in the terms referring to homosexual orientation in magisterial teaching, from “innate instinct” in 1975, to “condition” in 1986 and in the original 1992 Catechism, to “inclination” in more recent documents.
This change is not insignificant. Much of the opposition to the natural law argument for proscribing homosexuality, and gay marriage a fortiori, in recent Catholic discourse rests on the perception that homosexuality is not a voluntary condition. Charles Curran cites the former reading of Catechism 2358, in an article produced before the revision, to support his call for a change in the existing Catholic teaching regarding gay marriage.\textsuperscript{11} Bishops Gumbleton of Detroit and Clark of Rochester, among others, “argue[d] that this is a loophole which can be used to defend homosexual acts: it excuses homosexuals for giving in to sexual temptation.”\textsuperscript{12} Even after correction, the former statement persists as a source of support for dissenting moral theologians. Salzman and Lawler, in a 2008 article arguing for the normalization of homosexual sex and gay marriage, cite the former reading of Catechism 2358 to support the statement: “Scientific studies overwhelmingly support the magisterium’s definition of sexual orientation, homosexual or heterosexual, as an “innate instinct,” that is, it is not chosen.”\textsuperscript{13}

The persistence, even after magisterial correction, of the view among Catholic theologians that the Church teaches that same-sex attraction results from an excusing or normalizing innateness is understandable, since the U.S. Bishops explicitly make that argument themselves. In October, 1997, a statement of the U.S. bishops on homosexuality titled \textit{Always Our Children} cited the former reading of Catechism 2358 to make explicit that same-sex attraction is beyond the purview of moral choice: “Generally, homosexual orientation is experienced as a given, not as something freely chosen. By itself, therefore, a homosexual orientation cannot be considered sinful, for morality presumes the freedom to choose.” Although the wording of Catechism 2358 in the supporting footnote was revised following the Vatican revision of the Catechism, and subsequent statements from the U.S. bishops move away from implying innateness or a stable orientation, these sentences in \textit{Always Our Children} remain unchanged and are still published and widely distributed by the bishops. This statement thus provides an ongoing official basis for the normalizing innateness argument in American Catholic discourse, nullifying, to some extent, the Vatican revision on this point.\textsuperscript{14}

More importantly, following the sequence of four levels of disorder discussed above (in the first section), equivocation on the disordered nature of same-sex attraction effectively undermines opposition to same-sex marriage, even among Catholics who are not inclined to dissent. It is important to clarify that the additional reasons to oppose a higher level of homosexual disorder do not nullify moral opposition to lower levels of homosexual expression. Even among
knowledgeable and committed Catholics, it is common to hear the view that there is nothing wrong with being homosexual in orientation as long as one doesn’t act on it; contrary to the Church’s understanding that same-sex desire, to the extent it is a condition, constitutes an “intrinsic moral disorder.” While it is pastorally important not to communicate a destructive sense of condemnation to persons who experience same-sex attraction, in a civil and media environment where the moral evaluation of such inclinations is itself under question, expressions intended not to overstate personal culpability on the basis of a technical distinction can easily have the effect, for ordinary people, of understating the objective wrongness of such desires. It is understandably hard for faithful American Catholics to discern why homosexual marriage would be wrong when the U.S. bishops themselves have said that homosexual attraction is not sinful.

Finally, in the background of the current struggle over the issues of homosexuality and SSM is the legacy of the 1960s, not only the upheaval of the Second Vatican Council, but particularly the effect of the subsequent encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. In response to this document, American Catholics overwhelmingly rejected papal teaching on a matter of private sexual behavior, instead adopting contrary norms that were rooted in and compatible with American secular culture. Such rejection almost never resulted in any tension with their participation as Catholics, much less corrective teaching; often it was made with the tacit, and sometimes explicit, collusion of their priests and bishops. Prominent American Catholic scholars, as noted, led the way. The same social dynamic can also be seen, though to a lesser degree, in the past 40 years with regard to Church teaching on divorce and remarriage, and on sexual relations between unmarried persons. Today, with regard to another papal teaching on a matter of private sexual behavior (homosexual relations), it should not be surprising that American Catholics are not inclined to take Church teaching too literally or too seriously.
References


**Notes**

1. Catholic religious comparisons for the U.S. are confined to Protestants to reduce extraneous variation due to significant changes in the way the GSS has measured and included religious groups other than Catholic and Protestant since the early 1970s. Since over 90% of Americans are either Catholic or Protestant for most periods examined, this introduces little inaccuracy. The Protestant-Catholic distinction is also the only one with any political salience.

2. From Figure 6A, the ratio of agreement to disagreement on homosexual marriage in 1988 was 11.7/73.3 = 0.159. In 2008 the same ratio was 0.82. The 2008 ratio (.82) divided by the 1988 ratio (.159) equals 5.16. From Figure 9, the ratio of always wrong to not wrong at all on homosexual relations was, in 1985-89, 12.9/76.8 = 0.167; in 2005-08 it was 34.1/54.6 = 0.624; or .624/.167 = 3.74 times as large by 2008.

3. This reports Spearman’s rho statistic, a nonparametric measure of the correlation of ordinal variables, for the association of the four categories of opinion on homosexual relations with the four categories of opinion on homosexual marriage. The corresponding Pearson’s correlation coefficient is .57.

4. Protestant weekly attendees dropped from 87.9% opposed in 1988 to 81.4% in 2004-08, a difference of 7.5 points; Catholic weekly attendees dropped by 17.9 points, from 75.2% to 57.3%, an increase of 10.5 points over the Protestant decline. Protestants attending less frequently dropped by 19.3 points; Catholic less frequent attendees dropped by 29.3 points, an increase of 10 points over the Protestant decline.

5. Figure 10 is adapted from Jeffrey Lax and Justin Phillips, “Gay Rights in the States: Public Opinion and Policy Responsiveness”, *American Political Science Review* 103(3), forthcoming; prepublication draft


11. Curran, “Sexual orientation and human rights,” 92. Curran argues that instituting gay marriage will not weaken heterosexual marriage because, since “no one chooses her or his sexual orientation. … individuals are not going to choose to be lesbian or gay so they can avoid marriage.”


13. Salzman and Lawler, “Truly Human Sexual Acts,” 668. They also note the revision, but clearly (albeit irrationally) take the first, unrevised, statement as representative of current magisterial teaching on this question.

example, arguing that homosexual orientation is innate and involuntary
as part of his extended plea for Catholic homosexuals to accept both
homosexual orientation and acts as positively affirmed by God, notes:
“[The innateness of homosexuality] is acknowledged by the American
Catholic Bishops when they say in their 1997 message “Always Our
Children,” “Generally, homosexual orientation is experienced as a given,
not as something freely chosen.”