

Opinion

Some fundamental questions on same-sex attraction

Daniel Avila

Posted: 10/28/2011

More than once I have heard from or about Catholics upset with the Church for its insistence that sexual relations be limited to marriage between husband and wife. Does not this moral rule force people with same-sex attraction into lives of loneliness? If they are born that way, then why should they be punished by a restriction that does not account for their pre-existing condition? God wants everyone to be happy, and for persons with same-sex attraction is not their happiness to be found in the fulfillment of that attraction? Some seek to change the Church's teaching on marriage or have left the Church because of it. They believe either that God through the Church ignores the needs of people or that the Church misunderstands what God desires.

That is, if God causes same-sex attraction, and yet commands that it not be satisfied, then this is divine cruelty. Or, if God causes same-sex attraction, then it must be the divine will that those with the attraction should act on it and it is the Church that is being cruel in its teaching or at the very least tragically mistaken about what God wants. In either case, the belief that the Church is wrong on this issue starts from a faulty premise. God does not cause same-sex attraction.

The best natural evidence of what God causes and wants for us is our genetic code. Science has isolated certain genetic combinations that are typical to human creation and development. The most basic and the first genetic expression is that which occurs at our conception, when at the same time our individual human life begins our sexual identity as male or female begins. That which is genetically encoded, for believers, points to a codifier, and communicates through its design the codifier's intent. Interpreting from a spiritual perspective the genetic code which supplies our sexual difference, we have to conclude that God wants us to be male or female.

No one has found a "gay gene." Identical twins are always, of course, the same sex, providing further proof of male and female genes. If there was a gay gene, then when one twin exhibits same-sex attraction, his or her identical sibling should too. But that is not the case. The incidence of finding identical twins with identical same-sex attraction is relatively rare and certainly not anywhere near one hundred percent. Something other than the hardwiring found in the genetic code must explain the variance.

So what causes the inclination to same-sex attraction if it appears early and involuntarily and "who," if anyone, is responsible? In determining the answer to the "what" question, the most widely accepted scientific hypothesis points to random

imbalances in maternal hormone levels and identifies their disruptive prenatal effects on fetal development as the likely and major cause.

The most recent and most comprehensive discussion of this research is found in a book published earlier this year by a scientist who also happens to be a gay-rights advocate. Even though it discounts other environmental factors that other scientists believe also may play a role, Simon LeVay's publication, "Gay, Straight and the Reason Why: The Science of Sexual Attraction" is worth the read.

LeVay is not interested in the "who" question and describes same-sex attraction as just a variation among other human inclinations. Catholics do not have the luxury of being materialists. We look for ultimate explanations that transcend the strictly physical world and that stretch beyond our limited ability to mold and reshape reality as we know it. Disruptive imbalances in nature that thwart encoded processes point to supernatural actors who, unlike God, do not have the good of persons at heart.

In other words, the scientific evidence of how same-sex attraction most likely may be created provides a credible basis for a spiritual explanation that indicts the devil. Any time natural disasters occur, we as people of faith look back to Scripture's account of those angels who rebelled and fell from grace. In their anger against God, these malcontents prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls. They continue to do all they can to mar, distort and destroy God's handiwork.

Therefore, whenever natural causes disturb otherwise typical biological development, leading to the personally unchosen beginnings of same-sex attraction, the ultimate responsibility, on a theological level, is and should be imputed to the evil one, not God. Applying this aspect of Catholic belief to interpret the scientific data makes more sense because it does not place God in the awkward position of blessing two mutually incompatible realities -- sexual difference and same-sex attraction.

If in fact this analysis of causation and culpability is correct, then it opens new perspectives on the Church's teaching in this area. Being born with an inclination which originates in a manner outside of one's control is not sufficient proof that the condition is caused by God or that its satisfaction meets God's purpose. Furthermore, a proper understanding of who is really at fault should deepen our compassion towards those who experience same-sex attraction and inform our response to the question of loneliness. Ultimately, an accurate attribution of responsibility for same-sex attraction frees us to consider more fully the urgent question of why sexual difference matters so much to God. These matters will be addressed in my next column.

Daniel Avila formerly served the Catholic Bishops in Massachusetts and now lives and works in the Washington, D.C., area.