

but some ninety percent of Catholic fertile-age couples seeking to avoid pregnancy are contracepting right along with the rest of secularized Christians and the unchurched. This is a moral and ecclesial disaster reflected in empty pews and closed schools and churches. The basic problem is an unhappy combination of marital unchastity and lack of faith. The answer has to be a new evangelization and the teaching of marital chastity.

The right kind of NFP course — a truly Catholic NFP course — offers a splendid opportunity both for a

new Christ-centered evangelization and for teaching the “what” and the “why” of natural family planning. That sort of course is available through NFP International, and others are free to imitate it. I cannot think of any good reason why bishops and priests would not use their leverage to give engaged couples this beautiful opportunity to grow in faith, practice marital chastity, and hear the call to generous and responsible parenthood. A truly Catholic NFP course ought to be a requirement for every engaged couple. n

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## RECONCILIATION, NOT CONDEMNATION

Randall B. Smith

### Dialogue Without Compromise, Without Fear

None has done more to foster charitable and effective dialogue with the homosexual community than Melinda Selmys (“Authentic Dialogue Is Possible,” NOR, May). She courageously shows herself willing to suffer the slings and arrows of outraged partisans on both sides of the debate to model a kinder, more open, more compassionate approach, one that is desperately needed in this time of widespread anger and confusion. Hers is a voice Catholics desperately need to hear, for she manages to enunciate both a faithful witness to the Church’s teaching while remaining always charitable toward and engaged with those in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning (LGBTQ) community.

So why, when Melinda Selmys shows up to speak

on a Catholic campus, is she met by angry picketers? Why do members of the LGBTQ community attempt to keep people from hearing her, especially given that she is trying to exhort the Catholic community to learn to speak differently to and about gays? She is of course right about the problems that arose from the modern attempts to deal with (and eradicate) homosexual desire as a species of “psychological disorder” rather than as one among a number of spiritual challenges. Similar problems arose more recently in attempting to deal with pedophilia as primarily a “psychological disorder.” But how are we to clear up these confusions unless speakers are allowed to speak? There is, as I pointed out in my article (“Call the Police, It’s an Academic Lecture!” NOR, Jan.-Feb.), a rather strange irony in the fact that the people who were attempting to prevent others from hearing a lecture were some of the same people calling for “more dialogue” at the end. One wonders whether such people really know their own minds. And as the letter from the student newspaper I quoted in my article suggests, even after hearing Mrs. Selmys speak, not everyone in the LGBTQ community was pleased that she had been allowed to appear at the university — not unless her talk had been “balanced” by someone who represented *the other side*.

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Indeed, shortly before Mrs. Selmys came to campus, a professor at the same university had sent a column to the campus newspaper — a column he had written biweekly for over fifteen years — laying out the Catholic Church’s teaching on homosexuality. The article consisted almost entirely of quotations from official Church documents. The article was rejected by the student editor as being “too biased.” They might consider publishing it, the editor explained, if the professor could find someone else to represent *the other side*, so as to make the piece “more balanced.” Dozens of pro-gay articles had appeared in that same newspaper during the previous weeks and months, none of which came with the proviso that these expressions of opinion needed to be “balanced” by someone representing the Church’s position. When “balance” is required for one position but never the other, one begins to wonder whether the scales are being tipped.

Mrs. Selmys is certainly right when she suggests that “many people identify as gay or lesbian because they find love and acceptance within the LGBTQ community and nowhere else.” But this, as she knows better than I, is a tricky business. It depends upon what one means by *acceptance*. If by acceptance we mean: “I love you; I accept you as a person; I won’t stop loving you,” then yes. If by acceptance we mean: “I support you in your lifestyle choices,” then no. When a gay friend announces to me: “My partner and I are going to buy some eggs from an egg bank, have them fertilized with his sperm, and then pay a woman to carry the children until birth,” I know he wants my *acceptance*. But that is something I cannot give. He is planning to do something morally wrong — indeed, something ruinously wrong — and precisely because of my love for him, it is my duty to tell him so, as charitably and prudently as possible. If the “entrance fee” for “dialogue” is agreement not to make the other party feel “uncomfortable” by suggesting that he might have come to a wrong or imprudent conclusion, then I’m not sure when in life, if ever, one would be likely to have an actual dialogue. Let us say, then, *to both sides*, that such an entrance fee is too high a bar to actual dialogue. We both have to be willing to hear things we might not want to hear, but probably ought to hear anyway.

With regard to my article, my question wasn’t exactly “is dialogue even possible?” (a subtitle added by the editors) as though I were denying the possibility of even *talking* to people who disagree with the Church’s official teachings. Dialogue is always possible among people of

good will. My question, rather, was this: What would make authentic dialogue possible *on college campuses*, increasingly some of the least open-minded places in America? Is there some way of having a speaker such as Mrs. Selmys on a college campus *without* having it generate fear, anxiety, anger, and recrimination? Is there some way of providing a *zone of safety* for both sides within which authentic dialogue is possible? I recognize the persistence of fear among the members of the LGBTQ community. I don’t want to dismiss it; I don’t want to make fun of it. I want to understand it. And then I want to find a way to dispel it or get past it.

What I don’t think many people are willing to grant or recognize, however, is the fear that often haunts the

## Scholarship Fund

The Lord commanded: “Feed my sheep” (Jn. 21:17).

Many are the souls who would benefit from the forceful and compelling presentation of the Catholic faith found in the NOR, but who, for various reasons, do not possess the means to do so.

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Catholic side. It is a different kind of fear, of course — not one that attaches to their very identity — but it is a very real fear nonetheless. It is the fear of being labeled “boorish,” a “hater,” an “ignorant rube,” or a “worthless cretin” simply because one refuses to grant *without argument* the moral supremacy of the other side. Thus Matthew Franck, in the May issue of *First Things*, tells of writing an article in the *Washington Post* urging readers “to reject the use of reckless charges of ‘hate’ to shut down debate, and asking them to respect the defenders of marriage as people in possession of an *argument*.” Sadly, he says, many readers “leapt to the challenge of confirming” his thesis, “writing e-mails or commenting online” that he must indeed be “a hating, bigoted, irrational theocrat.” Says Franck, “So toxic is it to hold certain religious views that merely *believing* them works a ‘harm’ to other people. Those who hold these views must not only be prevented from enacting those views as the will of the democratic majority; they must, to the extent possible, be silenced in the public square. They must... *shut up*.”

The question we face, therefore, is this: How can Catholics love others (and ourselves) in such a way as to speak honestly about the sin, and not further alienate the sinner? How do we speak about such matters with conviction while always admitting that we do so *as sinners ourselves*? In short, how do we bring about reconciliation, and not merely condemnation? Here is a topic we’d better talk more about. Those who would rather not talk about sin at all — especially when it comes to politically privileged groups — aren’t really helping.

A final question about “ex-gays”: Why are their stories not acceptable? I have seen several self-described ex-gays give talks about their experiences, and they told stories very similar to one told by Melinda Selmys. They all agreed that there is no psychological “cure.” They did not “pray away the gay.” But many of them found that once they began to deal with some of the serious underlying issues, their same-sex attractions diminished. In this “post-modern” age, we embrace everyone’s “story” (or so we like to tell ourselves). Why are ex-gays the only group in America whose life stories can’t be told publicly or even spoken out loud?

It’s important to note, I think, that none of the “ex-gays” I’ve talked to became “heterosexual” in the corrupt, contemporary meaning of the term. None of the gay men transformed themselves into the type of adolescent boy who ogles women’s breasts and fantasizes about porn. Nor did the lesbians become Barbie Doll val-

ley girls giggling about sex or men’s “hot bods.” If that is what it means to be heterosexual, then who wants it? That is why, in the contemporary context, I think Catholics should eschew casual use of the terms *heterosexual* and *homosexual* in favor of a term like *healthy conjugal sexuality*. Healthy conjugal sexuality that leads to full and complete human flourishing is the Church’s goal, and it should be ours. There are numerous ways of falling short of the goal of human flourishing: adultery is one, one-night stands with members of the opposite sex is another, and same-sex genital activity is a third. Those who *only* focus on the third of these are guilty not only of a foolish bias, they are also missing the real source of the problem. There wouldn’t be as much pressure for homosexual marriage in this country if heterosexuals hadn’t made such a mess of it. When we point the finger at homosexuality, while turning a blind eye to the heterosexual “hijinks” of high-school and college-age boys and girls (or their parents), we are doing a grave disservice to the institution of marriage, and we shouldn’t be surprised if our gay brothers and sisters recognize the hypocrisy and react negatively against it.

What the self-described ex-gays I’ve encountered often had was a supportive community of people around them who were also dealing with similar same-sex attractions. Certain Protestant groups are doing good work in this area, especially when compared to those Catholic priests who seem determined to “be supportive” by encouraging gays to just “accept who they are,” “be themselves,” and act as they wish. The ex-gays I have known who at a certain point in their lives determined that their same-sex attractions were leading them astray, and who then began looking for help, found such priests contemptible. Other priests, for various reasons, prefer to remain silent about the whole thing, and they are equally unhelpful.

I have found that many young Catholics know the Church’s teaching on this issue; but they need to hear the teaching repeated regularly and *with conviction*. When Church authorities evade the issue, or take steps to support same-sex genital activity (as was often done in seminaries until recently), such young people will get frustrated and then angry, and the results can be terrible. They need to hear the teaching repeated clearly and unequivocally, and then, *in that context*, they need to hear how close-minded attitudes can lead to worsening the problem, and how charity can lead to helping. Many people are silent about LGBTQ issues not because they accept LGBTQ *people*, but because they simply don’t want to get

their heads bitten off. Enforced silence is not the same as acceptance. Silence often breeds contempt; contempt, then, breeds anger; and anger can breed violence. And violence against gays is something that is always and everywhere absolutely unacceptable.

On this, whatever else our agreements or disagreements, Mrs. Selmys and I are in absolute and complete accord. There is not only no support in Church teaching for “gay-bashing” of any sort (verbal or otherwise), there

is nothing but explicit condemnation. No one can consider himself a “good Catholic” who engages in such activities, any more than anyone should consider himself a good Catholic who uses derogatory language against blacks, Hispanics, Jews, the mentally retarded, or Protestants. You aren’t a good Catholic because of what you *hate*; you’re a good Catholic because of what you *love*. How to love and speak the truth in charity is, however, the problem we now face. n

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## Melinda Selmys Replies

Randall Smith asks whether it is possible to create a “safe place” in which “authentic dialogue” can take place. The answer: Not really. Dialogue is rather like sex: It can be safe, or it can be effective. When people dialogue there’s always the risk that one of the parties will have to change his mind or his behavior; apologies may be necessary; feelings might get hurt. The most effective dialogue involves all three of these elements.

Authentic dialogue cannot be safe, but it can be respectful. Respectful dialogue is not castrated dialogue that tiptoes around the truth; it is dialogue that speaks with genuine respect for the personality and free will of the other person. Prof. Smith is absolutely right in pointing out that when Catholics merely keep silent, and especially when priests scandalize their LGBTQ congregants by being “accepting” without being truthful about the Church’s teaching, it leads to misunderstanding and contempt. It is very unpleasant to be around someone who silently disapproves of you, or who paternalistically treats you as though you’re a spiritual infant who is not capable of handling the real demands made by Christian morality. A lot of people who have abandoned a gay identity in order to become Catholic have observed that it is demeaning to the dignity of gay and lesbian people to treat them as if they were slaves to biology, natural-born sex-addicts who are incapable of rational self-determination or responsible moral action.

The caveat is that respectful dialogue can’t just tell the truth; as Prof. Smith acknowledges, it has to tell the

truth *in charity*. This is a principle most everyone is familiar with, but one which hardly anyone implements effectively. It is much easier to come up with an argument to explain why the things we’re *already doing* really are loving and charitable than it is to do the kind of honest self-examination necessary to understand why they might not be. In the case of the LGBTQ community, a lot of Christian outreach is hamstrung by its overweening concern with fraternal correction. Before we’ve even started to figure out how we’re going to love our neighbor, we’re trying to figure out how we’re going to use that love to convince him of the truth. This is backwards. The truth is an important part of love, but it is subservient. If you first love someone, then telling the truth will happen naturally, and it will happen in a way that will penetrate to the heart. If you only “love” someone in order to teach him that his way of life is sinful, you won’t get very far.

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Melinda Selmys is the author of *Sexual Authenticity: An Intimate Reflection on Homosexuality and Catholicism* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2009). A regular columnist for the National Catholic Register, her articles have appeared in numerous Catholic publications, including This Rock, The Catholic Answer, and Envoy. She writes from Canada, where she lives with her husband and their six children.

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