

It seems like every time I try to explain the Church's teaching regarding same-sex "marriage" I am accused of being a "bigot" or a "homophobe." I am told that I "hate" and that it is a violation of a person's civil rights to say that they cannot marry whomever they want. How do I respond?

This is a cultural issue that will have serious consequences for generations to come. All thinking people must seriously consider the facts and the far-reaching implications of any change in legislation with regard to this issue.

I am disheartened by the use of these terms. In my experience, the only thing these terms do is short-circuit intelligent discussion. By using words like these, a person or group who is opposed to same-sex acting out is painted as someone whose perspective is based on irrational hatred or fear. Unfortunately, I have experienced this as well.

Webster's Dictionary defines a "bigot" as a "person who is obstinately or intolerantly devoted to his or her own opinions and prejudices; especially: one who regards or treats the members of a group (such as a racial or ethnic group) with hatred and intolerance."

It is possible that someone who opposes so-called same-sex marriage is guilty of hatred, but is this necessarily so? By definition, prejudice prejudges people according to irrelevant criteria: race, gender, wealth, etc. Honest and reflective discernment, however, distinguishes between truth and falsehood, right and wrong.

Prejudice often claims that some people are worth more than others according to some arbitrary standard, but this is not what Christians are claiming in this debate. In the case of this legislation, we are not determining a person's worth, but whether or not the legislation is oriented towards the common good and the dignity of the human person. No one is talking about making those with same-sex attraction into "second-class citizens."

Furthermore, the Catholic Church squarely condemns any law that would violate a person's dignity as being made in the image and likeness of God. The Church has spoken out against crimes perpetrated against any human being. This includes the bullying and unjust discrimination leveled against men and women with same-sex attraction.

A phobia is an "exaggerated and usually inexplicable and illogical fear" of something. What happens when this word is used in the context "homophobia"? What is being said is that the person who opposes the acceptance of same-sex attraction is acting out of an irrational fear.

Essentially, the person who is a bigot has an irrational hatred and the person who has a phobia has an irrational fear. But are all people who support the traditional definition of marriage driven by these illogical hatreds and fears?

When these terms are used in public discourse, it places the individual or group in the class of people who are illogical, hateful and fearful.

With regard to “hate,” it is tragic that Christians have become associated with this term in regard to same-sex attraction. Jesus commands us to love everyone. Men and women who experience same-sex attraction are not our enemies; they are our brothers and sisters. The fact that the Church is generally thought of as hateful represents a serious failure on our part to truly love our brothers and sisters.

Is it hateful or unjust to have laws that regulate marriage? No one can marry anyone they please. This is not singling out any certain group and denying them rights that belong to others. We have laws regulating marriage for everyone. No one can marry their sibling, or their dog, or multiple people at once, or a member of their own gender. The statement that people cannot marry members of their own sex is no more based on hate than is the statement that no one can marry his or her grandmother. It is a simple affirmation that is based on the reality of what marriage is.

So why are these terms used? Unfortunately, many Christians come across as being angry or fearful. I believe that there has been a lack of true compassion and willingness to listen to the stories of the men and women who experience same-sex attraction. In many Christian circles, the impression that we give the rest of the world is that we are secretly hoping that these people are condemned.

I also think that sometimes Christians have acted in knee-jerk fashion, immediately reacting to the same-sex lobby in government and the media rather than reflectively and intelligently responding in love.

But I also believe that these terms are used to end the discussion. If I am coming from an irrational point of view, then I am not worth listening to.

As participants in government and public discourse, we need to define our terms and make sure we are using them accurately. This goes for both sides in the debate. Neither group is squaring off against monsters on the other side of the fence; we are respectfully, intelligently and lovingly arguing an issue that is important for all of us.