

CRIMINALIZING CONVERSION THERAPY

Fr. D. Paul Sullins

In America you can go to a therapist and get nonjudgmental help for psychological distress due to divorce, adultery, prostitution, promiscuity, polyamory, pornography, pedophilia, and many other issues related to sexual choices and behavior. If you want to amend your behavior—for example, to stop promiscuity or viewing pornography—talking with a trained therapist can often help bring personal insight and strength to do so. Many clergy and pastoral counselors help persons who struggle to follow, or wrestle with guilt from not following, their faith's moral demands in these areas. Catholics may be familiar with networks of psychotherapists such as CatholicTherapists.com, who operate in full adherence to the magisterium of the Catholic Church, or Rachel's Vineyard, who are committed to serving women and men recover from the pain of abortion.

You can get such help for every problem, that is, except one: in a growing number of places in America, if a young person struggles with being sexually attracted to persons of the same sex, it is against the law for a therapist to help him or her try to reduce or avoid acting on those attractions. The therapist is required, by law, to affirm that same-sex attraction is unchangeable and anal sex is natural and healthy. Currently 28 states and several dozen cities or counties have in place bans on therapy that may take a different approach. Violators are subject to hefty fines, typically five figures per violation.

If you think that such censorship only applies to licensed therapists, and would not inhibit clergy from talking about their faith, think again. Proposed laws against “conversion

therapy” would prohibit much more than therapy. Fr. Philip Bochanski, Executive Director of the Courage apostolate, recently explained to me in an email how such legislation could harm the Church’s outreach to same-sex attracted Catholics:

People who are troubled by their experience of same-sex attractions or gender identity discordance sometimes seek out therapy to understand this experience better and to achieve the integration of sexuality that is at the heart of the Church’s definition of chastity. But unless the counselor affirms that such experiences are natural, inborn and perfectly healthy, their discussions with their patients or clients are often considered “conversion therapy.” ...

Proponents of [laws banning conversion therapy] have been increasingly successful in convincing the general public that whenever a parish priest, a college chaplain, or an apostolate like Courage talks to someone about the importance of living virtuously and choosing chaste friendship instead of same-sex intimate relationships, what they’re really doing is practicing “conversion therapy.” This is a serious mischaracterization, and gives people the mistaken impression that the Church and its ministers are intentionally harming people and trying to “pray away the gay.”

The intended effect of such legislation seems clear: it will restrict the freedom, and often the willingness, of pastoral ministers and other people of faith and good will to speak, in public or one-on-one, about what the Word of God has to say on issues of sexual morality, attraction and identity.

Pending or existing therapy bans in other parts of the world confirm the reality of the threat to religious freedom that Father Bochanski describes. Canada prohibited “non-affirmative” or “conversion” therapy nationwide last year, France last month, and England is considering a ban. The United Nations has made a global ban on conversion therapy a

priority.

- In response to the proposed ban in Great Britain, last December thousands of pastors and church workers, including Catholic bishops, priests and deacons, wrote an open letter to Parliament stating: “We see in these proposals a clear possibility that our duty as ministers, of proclaiming the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and calling people to find life in him, which includes living by his laws, will be criminalised.” The signatories publicly pledged that they would continue to teach and preach the Biblical view of sexuality and sex difference, even if it meant serving time in prison.
- In January 2022 a prominent member of the parliament of Finland was indicted on criminal charges for tweeting a photograph of a Bible verse (Romans 1:24-27) after her church, the Finnish Lutheran Church, sponsored a gay pride event. If convicted, the penalty for this 62-year-old medical doctor and mother of five, the former Interior Minister of Finland, will be two years in jail. She also faces additional jail time, as does her bishop, for charges related to the publication of a 2004 pamphlet titled “Male and Female He Created Them” (quoting Genesis 5:2), under laws that consider any suggestion that homosexuality is not healthy or normal to be a “crime against humanity.”

To date therapy bans in the United States have been restricted by constitutional guarantees of religious freedom, but their advocates are working to change that. The Movement Advancement Project, an LGBT advocacy agency that ranks U.S. states on how pro-gay their policies are, rates the existence of a state law protecting freedom of religion or conscience as a negative for “equality for LGBT people.” They warn that “42% of [the] LGBTQ population lives in states with statutory religious exemption laws,” complaining that such laws “permit people, churches, non-profit organizations, and sometimes corporations to seek exemptions from state laws that burden their religious beliefs.” Absent an effective response, we face a realistic

prospect that laws will attempt to silence Catholic teaching and witness on human sexuality in the United States.

My research helps to respond to legal bans on so-called anti-homosexual “hate speech” or “conversion therapy,” by challenging, on the basis of objective evidence, some of the falsehoods that underlie such legislation, in particular the belief that same-sex attraction is a fixed, immutable condition. Attempting to change one’s sexual orientation, on this view, must inevitably fail, creating stress, self-hatred and disappointment that puts same-sex attracted persons at higher risk of psychological harm, especially suicide. If homosexual people are born that way, and cannot change, they conclude, it is wrongful discrimination not to affirm their same-sex desires and behavior as natural and healthy.

The Achilles heel of this argument, and the reason perhaps that LGBT activists are so concerned with banning any discussion of the possibility of change in sexual orientation, is that there is abundant evidence that people can and do change their same-sex attractions and behavior. Two compilations of such stories have been published just in the past year, each with dozens of stories of persons happily leaving homosexual practices: *X Out Loud: Emerging Ex-LGBT Voices*, and *Changed: Once-gay stories*. (One can be forgiven for not knowing about them; both books have been deplatformed from Amazon and any mention of them is blocked by Twitter and Facebook.)

In addition to personal accounts, there is strong evidence from population and survey data that homosexual attraction and behavior can and does change. Population surveys that collect sex partner histories have long documented that the majority of persons who report having only homosexual sex partners before age 25 have, by age 40, reverted to having only heterosexual sex partners. Last Spring I (with Dr. Christopher Rosik and Paul Santero) published the results of a survey of 125 men who had undergone some form of “sexual orientation

change efforts.” or SOCE, a blanket term for all forms of conversion therapy and related pastoral practices.

We found that over half of them (55%) achieved at least partial remission of unwanted same-sex sexuality. Over a quarter (26%) of the men who had engaged in same-sex acts now engaged exclusively in heterosexual sex, in most cases with a married partner, and 14% reported that their sexual attractions were now completely heterosexual.

Their psychological state generally improved following SOCE. Over a third (35%) experienced a strong reduction in depression and over a fifth (22%) reported reduced suicidality. This evidence directly contradicts the claim that homosexual attraction and behavior can never change and that attempting to do so will make persons more suicidal.

Opponents may argue that less successful SOCE alumni, who were not able to change their orientation, may experience more psychological harm. The stories celebrated in the secular media are all of this type, that is, of SOCE alumni who still identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual, and who report feeling harmed, typically more suicidal, by the experience.

To address this question, in January 2022 I published a study that compared a population sample of homosexual and bisexual persons who had undergone SOCE with those who hadn't, to see if the former were currently more likely to manifest greater psychological distress. None of the study participants had been successful in discontinuing same-sex attraction or behavior. Strikingly, I found that the two groups were statistically identical for seven measures of current harmful behavior, including self-inflicted harm (cutting), alcohol dependence, substance abuse, thoughts of suicide, planning suicide, declaring an intent to commit suicide, or attempting suicide. This result was notable because the SOCE participants were subject to worse childhood family conditions, higher minority stress and discrimination, and lower socioeconomic

status, all of which are correlated with a higher risk of harmful behavior, yet following SOCE their level of harm was no higher than their peers who had not experienced these conditions. After accounting for these differences, the risk of suicide attempts was five times lower following SOCE than for those never undergoing SOCE—the opposite of what LGBT advocates allege.

These findings confirm Fr. Bochanski's insights quoted previously, who adds in conclusion:

Ultimately, legislation like this, and the rhetoric that accompanies it, will make it less likely that people experiencing same-sex attractions or gender identity discordance will seek out the pastoral care that they need and deserve. ... [In this way] the legislation ... may end up hurting some of the very people whom they say they are trying to protect.

Those who confess that the Word of creation became flesh in Christ believe that reason and faith converge on the same set of truths about God and humanity. I hope these empirical truths, which mirror those of the Catholic faith, will help to open minds to understand, and hearts to pull back from criminal censorship, with potentially brutal consequences, of opinions and religious convictions with which they disagree.

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