“If truth evolves, there is no answer!”

11 May 2012

In announcing his newfound affirmation that same-sex couples should be able to get married, President Obama highlighted the fact that his personal position is “constantly evolving.” More aptly, it’s a position that is “revolving” ... as in turning completely around or even upside down. Evolution is a gradual development, along successive lines; revolution is overturning, rendering what is to what is not (or vice-versa).

Buoyed perhaps as much by political strategizing and fund-raising potential as he was by family conversations around the dinner table, the president provided several justifications for his public declaration, including the apparently increasing comfort level that people have with same-sex couples (this despite the fact that 31 states now have passed legislation banning so-called same-sex “marriage”); a generational divide in which college students of differing political persuasions nevertheless “believe in equality” and disdain treating people differently (this despite the natural difference that is fundamental to the meaning of “marriage”); and an

the wisdom of St. Francis de Sales applied to contemporary issues

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appeal to the biblical “value” of treating others according to the Golden Rule (this despite clear biblical teaching on the relationality of persons that makes “marriage” what it is).

Notwithstanding the governance of marriage benefits in society – where the distribution of social and financial “rights” does not require redefining reality – the larger cultural issue in the president’s position has to do with the idea that the truth of things evolves. That supposition is a contradiction. If something is true, it’s true. Understanding may develop more fully; explanations may emerge more effectively. But truth is. Something doesn’t “become” true due to increasing percentages in an opinion poll or shifting tides of political support.

If truth depends on comfort level, then anything and everything is subject to redefinition. Life will always feel better if we are able simply to change the meaning of things. Reality need not intrude in our lives if we would but re-define what is to suit our comforts. But a society that shapes its laws and conventions according to the shifting tastes of the populace or its leaders has no anchors by which to secure its future when the winds or tides of adverse opinions hold a majority sway.

If truth depends on an undefined notion of equality, then differences make no difference. That may be the bane of college-age youth, when all of life is viewed through the lens of potential and possibility, but it hardly squares with reality. Admittedly, all people are, indeed, equal in the sense of sharing a human dignity. But not all people are the same, particularly in terms of the gender with which they have been naturally endowed, by which they necessarily relate to other human beings, and because of which some relationships are capable of being complete through that unitive and procreative complementarity by which “two become one” in marriage.

If truth can be set aside under the guise of treating people kindly, then “no” becomes a nasty word, never to be spoken lest one run afoul of hurting another’s feelings. Of course, all people should be treated well, with respect for the human dignity proper to every person. But respectful treatment of people does not require sacrificing or ignoring the truth of things; on the contrary, it demands an acknowledgment of what is real. Nice is good; kind is expected. But a kindness that ignores reality isn’t really nice at all.

The issue in the debate about same-sex couples is not discrimination but definition; it’s not about personal preferences but about the very meaning of “marriage.” It comes down to the question of the truth of what that particular relationship is, and what really makes it distinct from any other relationship between any two people. But if the answer to that question is “constantly evolving,” then we will never have an answer, because that, too, may one day (r)evolve into something else.

For St. Francis de Sales, considerations such as this are critical to human flourishing; as he writes in his Treatise on the Love of God, “All joy and satisfaction consists in this: to discover and to recognize the truth about things, and the nobler the truths are the more joyfully and attentively our reason surrenders to their contemplation.”
For any society, whose very nucleus is the human family from which its citizens proceed, no nobler truth may exist than the meaning of marriage. And that truth is already there. It cannot evolve, for it lies in the very constitution of who persons are in relation to one another. We need only to discover and recognize this truth, if we but have the reasonable humility and collective courage to do so.

Established in 2000, the **SALESIAN CENTER FOR FAITH & CULTURE** at DeSales University seeks to promote the interaction of faith and culture through academic initiatives that focus on integrating social concerns and gospel values in the tradition of Salesian Christian Humanism. The activities of the Center include research on faith developments in the modern world; dialogue about how spirituality can impact our contemporary life; and partnership with various sectors of the local community to forge the link between faith and culture. Among its institutes are professional societies focusing on ethical concerns in communications, healthcare, law & public policy, and the workplace.