

**Clarification on the Issue of Funeral Rites and Those in Homosexual Civil or Notorious Unions**  
***By Msgr. James Bartylla, Vicar General, Diocese of Madison***

*"You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. – Mt 22:37-39*

*Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. – Mt 18:6*

Recently, there has been media attention regarding a private and confidential communication to the priests of the Diocese of Madison regarding funeral rites and those in homosexual civil or otherwise notorious unions. The answers below are an attempt to correct misinterpretations of the communication and provide explanation so there is greater clarity. To all those who try or hope to try to live the challenge of following the natural law and thereby the Church's teaching while struggling with same-sex attraction and perhaps many times faltering, please know you are loved and respected, and always welcome in the Catholic Church and invited to the truth of the Gospel. Jesus Christ loves you and wants your joy.

**What is homosexuality?**

Homosexuality refers to relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex. It has taken a great variety of forms through the centuries and in different cultures. Its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained. The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial, but of itself is not sinful.

**What is the homosexual act?**

Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as gravely immoral, tradition has always declared that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered. They are contrary to the natural law and thereby contrary to the Creator's plan for human nature. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity.

**What has Pope Francis said on the issue?**

Pope Francis said, "We need to acknowledge the great variety of family situations that can offer a certain stability, but de facto or same-sex unions, for example, may not simply be equated with marriage. No union that is temporary or closed to the transmission of life can ensure the future of society." [Amoris Laetitia, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Paragraph #52.](#)

**What is asked of persons with same-sex attraction?**

Persons with same-sex attraction are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection. As Pope Benedict said, the truth can be painful and uncomfortable, but it is the way to peace, joy, and inner freedom.

**Where in the Bible is the homosexual act referenced?**

Please see [Genesis 19](#), [Leviticus 18:22](#), [Romans 1:26-27](#), [1 Corinthians 6:9-10](#), [1 Timothy 1:8-10](#). For a discussion of our creation as male and female, see [Genesis 1:27](#) and [Genesis 2:21-14](#).

### **What is the natural law?**

Certain obligations and rights are inherent by virtue of our human nature, inscribed in our being and indeed in our very bodies as male and female by the Creator, and that these can be understood universally through human reason alone. Thus the law of human nature, or the human ecology, is universal, and exists independently of the positive law of a given state, political order, legislature, or society at large.

### **What is authentic love (charity)?**

Charity (love) for my neighbor is not the desire that my neighbor be free of all suffering, but the desire that everything associated with my neighbor is good. True charity demands that we seek the virtue of the other according to our human nature and the natural law. I am “my brother’s keeper”. Mere tolerance isn’t sufficient for charity; I must love my neighbor and desire his/her virtuous good according to the truth.

### **Why must we love our neighbors who struggle with same-sex attraction?**

Persons with same-sex attraction must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. It is deplorable that persons with same-sex attraction have been and are the object of violent malice in speech or in action. The intrinsic dignity of each person must always be respected in word, action, and law. Persons with same-sex attraction are often generous and giving of themselves. However, the proper reaction to crimes committed against persons with same-sex attraction should not be to claim that the homosexual act is not disordered. Persons with same-sex attraction are called to fulfill God’s will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord’s Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition. As Most Reverend Robert C. Morlino, Bishop of Madison, wisely states, persons with same-sex attraction carry a heavy cross, and it is our role to help them carry it, like Simon of Cyrene assisted Jesus to carry His cross. This includes telling such persons of the truth of Jesus Christ, and what is necessary for salvation, in addition to supporting them in their struggle for chastity.

### **Is it proper to refer to those who consider the homosexual act as intrinsically disordered as bigots or haters?**

Engaging in such derogatory references is contrary to the dignity of the human person. To tell someone, “If you don’t condone my behavior, you are a hater or a bigot”, negates the respect due the other person in justice who has a right to his/her own beliefs and convictions with the concomitant duty to inform his/her conscience according to the truth. Many people may disagree with the Catholic Church or with what I may write, but such opposition gives me no right to vilify my opponent, which would be a sin against justice to my neighbor. Any opponent has the same obligation.

### **Why would the Church ever deny Funeral Rites?**

Since praying for the dead and comforting those who mourn are such important works of the Church, the Church desires for every member of the faithful to have a funeral unless the most serious of causes prevent this. One situation that necessitates denial of a funeral is the case of “manifest sinners who cannot be granted ecclesiastical funerals without public scandal of the faithful.” There are three conditions implicit in this norm, all of which must be met for the prohibition to be invoked. Firstly, the deceased must have been a “manifest sinner.” This means that during his or her lifetime, the deceased not only committed seriously sinful acts for which no reasonable excuse can be advanced, but also did so in a public way. This condition would not apply even to those whose serious sins are well known among family and friends. Rather, the sin must have a public or manifest character.

Secondly, the deceased must not have shown any sign of repentance before death. If there is even the most feeble sign of repentance, such as calling upon the name of the Lord or kissing a crucifix as death approaches, the funeral must be celebrated. It is only when such signs are altogether lacking that a funeral can be denied. Thirdly, it must be impossible for the funeral to be celebrated without causing public scandal.

It is only when all three conditions are met that the prohibition can and must be invoked. The first two conditions are fairly objective. The third category, however, is highly dependent on local circumstances and cultural factors.

There may be some cases in which the risk of scandal is present but the realization of that risk could be avoided through the way the funeral rite is carried out.

#### **What is “public scandal”?**

The term “scandal” is used here in the traditional and technical sense of “leading another person into sin”. An act of scandal would lead others to approve of a person’s sinful action, or at least to become confused about whether the action is sinful. Scandal in this sense has nothing to do with whether a certain action causes gossip or surprise in the community. It is not a matter of “PR.” In fact, the danger for scandal is the greatest when the action is seen as totally unremarkable, e.g., when persons are erroneously convinced that a certain sinful action or lifestyle is normal and good. The avoidance of public scandal is a matter of caring for the good of the souls of the living.

#### **Is the potential denial of funeral rites unjust discrimination?**

Persons with same-sex attraction, as human persons, have the same rights as all persons, including the right of not being treated in a manner which offends their personal dignity. Nevertheless, these rights are not absolute, and may be legitimately limited for objectively disordered external conduct (unlike the categories of race or ethnicity which are not connected with possible objectively disordered external conduct). This limitation of rights for such external conduct is sometimes not only licit but obligatory. The Church determined over the course of many centuries, in its pastoral wisdom for the care of living souls, that unrepentant manifest sinners should be denied funeral rites if it is impossible to avoid public scandal.

#### **Does the potential denial of funeral rites also deny burial of the deceased’s body?**

No, the burial of the body is a separate work of mercy for the deceased. The Church in its long tradition desires that all persons receive a dignified and proper burial, since Christians respect and honor the bodies of the dead and the places they rest, especially in anticipation of the general resurrection at Christ’s second coming.

#### **Why was there a communication to priests on the matter at this time?**

The reason for the private and confidential communication to priests in the Diocese of Madison on this issue of funeral rites was the result of questions from priests to the Bishop of Madison and his Vicar General. Priests with concrete situations, particularly on new matters that have less settled praxis, seek guidance from diocesan leadership.

#### **What was the intent of the communication to priests?**

Contrary to popular but erroneous belief, the intent of communication from the Vicar General to the priests in the Diocese of Madison on this issue of funeral rites was to exhort them to prudent and thorough thought regarding the issue when it arises, and to offer the priests advice on areas of risk of public scandal and ways in which that risk of public scandal could be minimized so that funeral rites might be legitimately celebrated in the case of an unrepentant manifest sinner. Also, if funeral rites could not be celebrated due to public scandal, options were considered for other ways to pray for the soul of the deceased and to care for the family of the deceased.

#### **Does the potential denial of funeral rites endanger a soul’s eternal destiny?**

Whereas the reception of the sacraments may be critical to the salvation of one’s soul, e.g., baptism or the Sacrament of Confession, the Christian funeral rite and subsequent burial cannot decide the eternal status of a soul which is already before God, and therefore beyond the power of the Church to aid in one’s salvation.

---

- *This document draws from Sacred Scripture and various documents of the Catholic Church, including the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Code of Canon Law.*
- *This document is dedicated to the extraordinary men and women of the Catholic apostolate, COURAGE, in which men and women with same-sex attraction strive to lead chaste lives according to the natural law and the teachings of the Catholic Church. They are truly “saints in the making” deserving of admiration.*