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A Conservative Catholic Now Backs Same-Sex Marriage

By MARK OPPENHEIMER

HOT SPRINGS, S.D. — In the past couple of years, conservative opposition to same-sex marriage has clearly started to erode. Prominent Republicans like Senators Rob Portman and Lisa Murkowski and former Secretary of State Colin L. Powell have come out in support of gay marriage. Even David Blankenhorn, the expert witness in the Proposition 8 trial in California and a Democrat, announced that he had changed his mind.

They are, for the most part, moderate conservatives using secular, democratic arguments. None come from the Christian right. Among religious conservatives, opposition to same-sex marriage has remained essentially unquestioned.

Which is why “[The Things We Share: A Catholic’s Case for Same-Sex Marriage](#),” an essay by Joseph Bottum, published Friday on the Web site of *Commonweal* magazine, is something new in this debate.

Mr. Bottum, 54, is a serious Christian. He attended Roman Catholic high school, college and graduate school. His erudite writing for conservative magazines like *National Review* and *The Weekly Standard* is laced with references to church history and theology and to Christian writers like G. K. Chesterton and W. H. Auden. He fiercely opposes abortion, and for five years, until 2010, he was editor in chief of *First Things*, a key opinion journal for religious conservatives.

In his large Victorian house here 50 miles from Mount Rushmore, a crucifix hangs in the hallway. At lunch, he crossed himself before we sat down. Mr. Bottum is the kind of man who, when he casually says “Thomas,” you know that he means Aquinas, the 13th-century Catholic philosopher.

Not five years ago, he condemned backers of gay marriage as amoral. Yet in his new long and challenging essay, Mr. Bottum argues, in effect, that he was wrong and that fellow conservative Catholics are misinterpreting their tradition, in particular Aquinas’s “natural law” theology.

Aquinas considered heterosexual, monogamous union the highest form of marriage, but Mr. Bottum believes that he was actually less interested in strict legal precepts than in an enchanted vision of the world — a vision that, Mr. Bottum now says, is better served by supporting same-sex marriage.

But before we got deep into theology, Mr. Bottum told me about his family. As we sat on his front porch, in sight of the track at the town high school, the Marlboro-smoking, fair- and floppy-haired Mr. Bottum reminded me that his great-uncle lost his Senate seat to George McGovern. Mr. Bottum’s grandfather, the senator’s brother, might have won office, had he not converted to Catholicism.

“We had another name for conversion,” Mr. Bottum said, when I visited him on Wednesday. “We called it ‘marrying an Irish girl.’ ”

Mr. Bottum’s parents weren’t very religious, he said, but he always had a metaphysical side: “I never didn’t believe in God.” His passion for Catholicism was heightened when, as a student at Georgetown, he encountered the poetry of Robert Lowell, a Catholic convert. “I really got Lowell, and read him to pieces,” said Mr. Bottum, whose friends call him Jody.

He attends Mass weekly and objects to the death penalty as well as abortion, which leaves him frustrated with both political parties. (On balance, the Republicans are “usually more educable on the death penalty than Democrats are on abortion.”) He took his family from Manhattan back to South Dakota three years ago, after he was fired by *First Things*, for reasons he will not discuss.

If Mr. Bottum had testy relations with his co-workers at *First Things*, many of them Catholic conservatives, there was little sign that he would break with them on same-sex marriage. And a disagreement over Aquinas seemed even more unlikely.

Religious Catholics are generally united in their reverence for St. Thomas Aquinas, whose theology dominates Catholic thought. The traditional-marriage movement is led by men like Brian S. Brown, the president of the National Organization for Marriage, and Prof. Robert P. George of Princeton, Catholics who rely on Aquinas's reasoning to make the contemporary case for traditional marriage.

So Mr. Bottum's change of heart is noteworthy. He makes several arguments. The first is pragmatic.

Basic democratic premises like fairness, equal rights and majority rule suggest that the time for same-sex marriage has come, he says. We can agree, Mr. Bottum argues, that Americans are turning in favor of same-sex marriage, and there "is no coherent jurisprudential argument against it — no principled legal view that can resist it." Furthermore, the bishops' campaigns against same-sex marriage "are hurting the church." Especially for the young, Catholicism is coming to symbolize repression.

So this fight would only be worth fighting, for Catholics, if their theology required such a fight. Mr. Bottum now believes — here's where the essay will really outrage fellow churchmen — that Catholics are mistaken to think that natural law requires them to oppose same-sex marriage.

Natural law, as systematically explained by Aquinas in his treatise *Summa Theologica*, is the will of God as understood by people using their reason. Aquinas extrapolates many principles of natural law, including those of marriage. But Mr. Bottum contends that these rules are not the point.

Natural law, Mr. Bottum writes, depends for its force on a sense of the mystery of creation, the enchantment of everyday objects, the sacredness of sex. In the West, that climate of belief has been upended: by science, modernism, a Protestant turn away from mysticism, and, most recently, the sexual revolution. The strictures of natural law were meant to structure an enchanted world — but if the enchantment is gone, the law becomes a pointless artifact of a defunct Christian culture.

"And if," Mr. Bottum writes, "heterosexual monogamy so lacks the old, enchanted metaphysical foundation that it can end in quick and painless divorce, then what principle allows a refusal of marriage to gays on the grounds of a metaphysical notion like the difference between men and women?"

Traditional-marriage activists would counter that we can at least begin a Christian renaissance by upholding marriage's last connections to its Christian past. But Mr. Bottum says that's the wrong starting point. "There are much better ways than opposing same-sex marriage for teaching the essential God-hauntedness, the enchantment, of the world," he writes.

Better tactics might include "massive investments in charity, the further evangelizing of Asia, a willingness to face martyrdom by preaching in countries where Christians are killed," and a churchwide effort to beautify the liturgy.

"I've given up on politics," Mr. Bottum said, as we sat on his wide porch after lunch. "I'll vote Republican, because I'm a Republican. But I don't believe a change in culture can come from politics. It can only come from re-enchantment with the world."

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Notes

¹<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/24/us/a-conservative-catholic-now-backs-same-sex-marriage.html>