

Living up to difficult standards

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Syndicated columnist

Many of you may recall the expression, "living in sin." Perhaps some even used it once or twice in the past.

Years ago no Catholic would have had any doubt about the nature of the "sin" in question. The expression always referred to a couple living together under one roof without the benefit of a valid marriage.

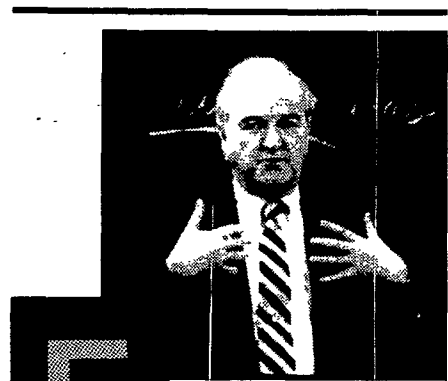
In those days, when closet doors were still tightly shut, couples under moral indictment were of the traditional male-female kind. Today the expression "living in sin," would apply to homosexual living arrangements as well.

Whatever the relationship's composition, however, the "sin" was always sexual in nature.

It should not have been so then, and it should not be so now.

"Living in sin" can apply just as directly to two people:

- who are part of an effort to keep black families from moving into the neighborhood;
- who have been enriched by dishonest business practices;
- who made a fortune off fraudulent investments sold to unwary senior citizens;
- who teach their children, by word and by example, to distrust and even to despise racial, ethnic and sexual minorities;
- whose income is derived from a family-owned company that denies its employees the right to unionize;
- who have a habit of destroying others' reputations on the basis of



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unproved allegations, gossip, or sheer prejudice.

As you can see, it's just a matter of how you define "sin."

The same is true of words like "hard," "difficult," and "sacrifice," as in the following sentence: "The church can't soften its 'hard' and 'difficult' teachings just to please alienated Catholics who won't make the necessary 'sacrifice' required to live a good Catholic life."

What are those "hard" and "difficult" teachings? What is the nature of the "sacrifice" expected of all "good" Catholics?

As in the case of the expression, "living in sin," one suspects that the moral focus is sexual.

Accordingly, there are "hard" and "difficult" sacrifices for homosexuals who are expected to follow the sexually abstinent path of a monk or a cloistered nun, even if they — not

unlike the vast majority of the human race — should lack the charisma or the psychological capacity for a lifelong commitment to abstinence.

Those "sacrifices" also apply to men and women, still relatively young, whose first marriage went radically astray through no fault of their own and who are now to live the rest of their lives devoid of intimacy and companionship.

That "hard" and "difficult" path, we are reminded, is also for the Catholic on the other side of the equation who happens to fall in love with a divorced person and who is expected nonetheless to walk away from the relationship — no matter how deep it may have become.

And, of course, young married couples are confronted with the "sacrificial" choice either of begetting as many children as biologically possible, regardless of the physical, emotional, or financial hardships, or of limiting their most intimate expressions of mutual love to certain prescribed days of the month — and hoping for the best.

To be sure, some sins are sexual in nature, but the really "hard" and "difficult" path of Christian "sacrifice" covers a much wider moral territory than that.

Jesus never challenged anyone about homosexuality or birth control. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, however, he did challenge people directly about prejudice against other ethnic groups (Luke 10:30-37).

And in the parable of the Prodigal Son he challenged the unforgiving

and the self-righteous (Luke 15:11-32).

Jesus declared to those who set themselves proudly above others that publicans and harlots would enter the kingdom of God before they would do so (Matthew 21:31-32).

For most of us, it requires real "sacrifice" to live a life free of pride and prejudice, to accept certain types of people as brothers and sisters, or to forgive those who have seriously wronged us.

Jesus also commanded us to love even our enemies (Luke 6:27-28), to avoid judging and condemning others (6:37), and to use our authority always for service, never for control (Mark 10:42-43).

For some Catholics the hardest "sacrifice" of all has to do with money and material possessions. If we really want to be his disciples, Jesus said, we must sell all that we have and give it to the poor (Mark 10:21).

Hearing this, the rich young man's countenance fell and he went away sad, "for he had great possessions" (v.22).

We readily acknowledge, therefore, that being a faithful Catholic is "hard" and "difficult," and always demands "sacrifice." When we use those words, however, we should say exactly what sort of difficulties and what kinds of sacrifice we have in mind.

Otherwise, our moral focus may appear too narrow and our moral agenda, too limited. More narrow and more limited, certainly, than what Jesus gave us.

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