



“A LABEL THAT STICKS.” By. Fr. Paul Scalia.

When I was in high school, the students fell into many different groups: preps, jocks, cheerleaders, punks, deadheads, druggies, geeks, and all the rest. Just about everyone received an unofficial but virtually unchangeable assignment to a particular group. When I work in high schools today, I discover little difference. The groups still exist (with just a few changes in terminology), and the teachers and administrators still counsel against the labels. As they wisely explain, labels reinforce stereotypes and prejudices; they prevent us from accepting individuals and getting to know the real person.

There is one difference, however. While still warning children against stereotypes and labels, high-school administrations increasingly encourage one group of students to label themselves: those who experience same-sex attractions. With the assistance (and sometimes pressure) of such groups as the Gay-Straight Alliance and the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network, high schools across the country now routinely have student organizations dedicated to promoting the tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality. Indeed, New York City has an entire school—Harvey Milk High School—devoted to “gay, lesbian, transgendered and questioning youth.”

Is it worth pointing out, even at this late date, that the teachers and administrators were right about the dangers of labeling—and wrong when they allowed and encouraged homosexual students to be labeled? As with most errors, this one proceeds from a certain truth and often from good intentions. The truth is that adolescents with same-sex attractions have a higher suicide rate and are more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs. Attributing these problems to persecution and harassment, the new groups pledge to create a safe atmosphere so that students will not be tempted to self-destructive behavior. But in practice this agenda means more than just an end to the name-calling. It means the approval of homosexuality and, in a new form of name-calling, an insistence that adolescents who experience same-sex attractions “come out” as homosexual.

This is, to begin with, a failure of common sense. Such categorizations feed into the adolescent penchant for labels. High-school students want to belong to a group. They want an identity. Getting to know other people, figuring them out, sorting out who you are in light of who they are—that can be difficult work. Labels make it much easier. Many adolescents latch on to an identity for a time and then think better of it later. For this reason parents and teachers traditionally guard against pigeonholing students in certain categories.

The new approach, however, does just the opposite. It encourages labeling. Rather than struggle through the difficulties of adolescence, a high-school freshman or sophomore can now, with official support, profess to be gay, and he instantly has an identity and a group. Now he belongs. He knows who he is. Gone is the possibility that adolescents might be confused, perhaps even wrong. Adults typically display a wise reserve about the self-discoveries of high-school students: they know adolescents are still figuring things out, and they recognize their responsibility to help sort through the confusion. So why is all this natural wisdom somehow abandoned these days in the most confused and confusing area of adolescent sexuality?

Of course, the phrases are tempting because of their convenience and efficiency. They are common, close at hand, and make quick work of a difficult issue. But they also identify an individual person with his homosexual inclinations. They presume that a person *is* his inclinations or attractions; he *is* a “gay” or *is* a “homosexual.” At some point adults have to admit that a fifteen-year-old who claims to be “a questioning transgendered bisexual” is really just confused.

Meanwhile, the schools’ endorsement of all this quickly undermines parents’ authority in an extraordinarily sensitive area. While the parents try to teach one thing at home, the school presents the opposite view, now not only in the classroom but also socially (which in high school might have a greater effect). And those parents who have a better way to handle their child’s difficulties will find their efforts thwarted. At home they strive to love their children, help them in their struggles, and teach a coherent truth about human sexuality. Meanwhile at school, children receive the propaganda and encouragement to argue precisely against what their parents say.

Much of this social engineering rests on the view that homosexuality is a fixed, inborn orientation. The school groups hold this as a dogma not open for discussion. In one of the presidential debates last year, when asked if he thought homosexuality was inherited or chosen, President Bush wisely and modestly answered that he did not know. With that he showed himself to be fairly well aligned with the scientific community, which itself cannot produce a uniform answer to the question. The supposed “gay gene” has never been proven or discovered. The most we can say is that certain people may have genetic predispositions towards homosexuality”which is a far cry from saying they inherit it.

The high-school organizations, however, have no qualms about pronouncing the matter settled. Insisting that homosexuality is inborn, they immediately conclude that an adolescent with homosexual inclinations must necessarily *be* homosexual, or gay, or lesbian, or transgendered—whichever label fits.

And once the label is assigned, it is awfully hard to remove. It lasts past high school and leaves the adolescent at the mercy of our culture's extremes. *What man of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?* Increasingly, our high schools distribute stones and serpents to hungry children. Adolescents legitimately confused or anxious about their sexuality receive the advice to assume the homosexual label, truncating their identities perhaps for their entire lives.

Given the obvious errors of this new approach, the question still remains, especially for parents: How should one respond to adolescents with same-sex attractions? Love must be the leading edge of the response. The school organizations attract adolescents precisely because they pledge unconditional acceptance and affirmation of the person, no matter what "orientation" he has. Never mind that receiving this acceptance and affirmation in effect requires signing up for the gay agenda, adolescents still perceive it as acceptance and affirmation. Parents need to understand how effective this is. The first point to make known, then, is not what is wrong but what is right: The child is lovable, and is loved. That love, more than anything else, instills in adolescents the trust and confidence they need to struggle with whatever painful and saddening realities they face.

Difficulties arise when the child insists on being accepted and loved not as a person but as a "gay," "homosexual," or "other"—when he wants to be loved according to the label. And our culture willingly indulges these labels for the same reason we used them in high school: We find it easier to deal with labels than with actual persons. Clearly this situation demands tremendous patience and perseverance; it requires parents to insist continually that, no, their child is not just the sum of his sexual attractions, that they can love their child while rejecting some of his actions.

Adolescents need to hear precisely this: People's sexual inclinations do not determine their identity. Nor does every so-called "homosexual" feel attractions of the same character or to the same degree. Some have strong and lasting homosexual desires; for others, such desires are slight and passing. Lumping everyone together as having the same orientation or identity is a grotesque reduction of a complicated reality, and it massively damages the very people it claims to help.

Resisting the labeling temptation demands that we reject the culture's vocabulary and adopt more precise terms. In popular usage, the words "gay" and "lesbian" imply a fixed orientation and the living out of a lifestyle. Even the term "homosexual person," which is used in some Vatican documents, suggests that homosexual inclinations somehow determine, which is to say confine, a person's identity.

Granted, the more accurate phrases do not trip easily off the tongue. But what is lost in efficiency is gained in precision. Terms such as "same-sex attractions" and "homosexual

inclinations” express what a person experiences without identifying the person with those attractions. They both acknowledge the attractions and preserve the freedom and dignity of the person. With that essential distinction made, parents can better oppose the attractions without rejecting the child. And as the child matures, he will not find his identity confined to his sexuality.

Further, opposition to homosexual attractions and actions makes sense only when it is rooted in the full truth of human sexuality. Gay school groups gain approval and support partly because heterosexual unchastity (contraception, masturbation, premarital sex, adultery, and all the rest) has compromised so many. Our culture’s deliberate separation of sex from procreation has destroyed our ability to articulate a coherent explanation of sexual ethics. Parents and educators have damaged the tools that would allow them to explain why homosexual activity is wrong.

Understanding the full truth of human sexuality produces an appreciation for purity. Of course, all young people need to strive for this virtue. But purity takes on a greater significance for those with same-sex attractions. Nothing will confirm a supposed “gay” identity more quickly and solidly than homosexual actions. After a homosexual encounter, the adolescent must either admit the error of his actions and repent”or more boldly identify himself with his actions and look for a way to justify them.

As sexual license increases in our culture, we will encounter more adolescents confused about their sexuality and perhaps experiencing same-sex attractions. The easy option is to dissolve the tension by approving homosexuality and even encouraging it. But the most charitable thing we can do for such youth is to love them as God’s own images, to teach them the full truth about human sexuality, and to enable them to live it. Anything less is giving our children stones when they ask for bread.

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