

Democrats in congress are delaying the vote on Attorney General-designate John Ashcroft. This week, after hearing oral testimony, they sent the Republican from Missouri 360 more questions. Ashcroft obliged with a written document 101 pages long. One response referred to the Catholic Church. A few years ago a gay businessman was nominated to become ambassador to Luxembourg. Ashcroft, although personally opposed to homosexual acts, told congress that he had blocked this man's nomination "based on the totality of his record," that he had never let someone's sexual orientation get in the way of being hired. But the man in question charged that Ashcroft indeed made this decision based on the individual's sexual orientation alone. Now in writing, Ashcroft has added this explanation: "I did not believe he would effectively represent the U.S. in Luxembourg, the most Roman Catholic country in all of Europe."

It's an interesting response on many levels, but above all it reveals a presupposition that the Catholic Church does not tolerate homosexuals.

Our Church's position on the topic is very delicate. We admit that the origins of same-sex orientation are unexplained. We hold firmly that sexual relationships belong only in marriage, where children may be conceived and mature. Because people of the same sex cannot produce children, our Church does not approve such sexual relationships. But society has become more accepting of gay sex. One sometimes hears a spiritual argument that if God created sexual orientation, surely God would expect someone to act on it. The controversy gets especially heated because of the words our Church uses. When Roman documents say that two people of the same sex cannot produce children, they use these words: "Homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered." When the same documents speak about same-sex attraction, even without sexual activity, they call this inclination "objectively disordered." All that needs to mean is that the order of nature is for man and woman to produce children, and that other attractions are not ordered for the same natural good. But the choice of words sounds especially harsh.

Far more compassionate are the sentences in our catechism that say, "Homosexuals must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided." The Catholic Church does not condemn homosexual persons, but it does ask them for chastity. It's unclear whether Attorney General-designate Ashcroft was making that distinction; perhaps he was.

Today's second reading is all about love. It is the most popular scripture passage at Christian weddings. Even so, Paul was not talking about marriage here. He described the kind of love that should exist among all Christians. The last two weeks we've heard him speak about the variety of gifts within the community. Today he says you can have all the gifts you want but they are meaningless if you don't have love. You can give speeches, do translations, be smart, have faith, give to the poor, and even suffer martyrdom, but if you don't do it with love it means nothing. Certainly, married couples show us how this is done. But we're all supposed to do it. We accept people; we challenge them. Always we love them.