

# `Bishops' marriage guy' blames devil for homosexuality

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(RNS) A policy adviser for the U.S. Catholic bishops' anti-gay-marriage initiative is under fire for a now-retracted column that blames the devil for homosexuality.

In an Oct. 28 column in the official newspaper of the Archdiocese of Boston, Daniel Avila attempts to answer "some fundamental questions on same-sex attraction," particularly its cause.

"The scientific evidence of how same-sex attraction most likely may be created provides a credible basis for a spiritual explanation that indicts the devil," he concludes.

The Boston Pilot retracted the column and issued an apology on Wednesday (Nov. 2), saying it "failed to recognize the theological error in the column before publication."

The newspaper did not name the error, but the Roman Catholic Church teaches that humans are made in the image and likeness of God, as Avila noted in his own apology.

Avila also said that "the Church opposes, as I do too, all unjust discrimination and the violence against persons that unjust discrimination inspires."

"I deeply apologize for the hurt and confusion that this column has caused," he said in a statement.

Avila added that his column does not reflect the opinion of the Catholic bishops and was not authorized before publication, as is required for staffers at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Since June, Avila has been a full-time staffer who advises the USCCB's Subcommittee for the Promotion and Defense of Marriage.

Unofficially, Avila refers to himself as "the bishops' marriage guy," according to the National Catholic Register, a conservative publication. Last month, the lawyer represented the USCCB on a panel about gay marriage at the conservative Values Voters Summit in Washington.

Sister Mary Ann Walsh, a spokeswoman for the bishops, said Avila had been told not to write about public policy issues in his Boston Pilot columns. She would not comment on whether Avila will face discipline.

"While the general population has debated whether it's nurture or nature that leads to a homosexual inclination, the church has not posed any theory in that regard," Walsh said.

Before moving to USCCB headquarters in Washington, Avila was the associate director of policy and research at the Massachusetts Catholic Conference, where he worked for 14 years.

James Driscoll, executive director of the conference, said Avila spearheaded the church's unsuccessful effort to repeal gay marriage in Massachusetts. "Dan was very involved in getting the church's position out to the public," Driscoll said.

The USCCB has made banning gay marriage one of its top priorities, lobbying lawmakers in Washington and in dozens of states nationwide.

Gay rights groups and liberal Catholics assailed Avila's column.

The Paulist Center of Boston said in a letter to the Pilot that the column "directly and intentionally causes pain for gay Catholics, their families, especially their mothers, their friends and their worship communities."

The center said it would remove all copies of the Pilot from its buildings in downtown Boston.

Terrence Donilon, a spokesman for the Archdiocese of Boston, said Avila's column was not pulled because of public pressure. "It was pulled because Dan retracted it and apologized, and because it simply should not have been printed or published in The Pilot."

Avila's retraction, which will be printed in this week's edition of the Pilot, says Scripture and the Catholic Catechism "make it clear that all persons are created in the image and likeness of God and have inviolable dignity."

In his original nearly 900-word column, Avila wrestled with the theological and scientific causes of homosexuality. He concludes that "the ultimate responsibility, on a theological level, is and should be imputed to the evil one, not God."

The Rev. James Martin, culture editor of the Jesuit magazine America, said it is a theological error to suggest that "part of a human being is made by Satan."

"We can be tempted by evil spirits to do bad things, but that doesn't mean that Satan created part of us," Martin said. "I think that's a theological misunderstanding of creation."