

Homosexuality

What does the Church teach?

by Father Michael J. Henchal

Throughout society at large and even within the Church itself confusion about the Catholic Church's teaching on homosexuality seems rampant. The emerging visibility of homosexuals and the "gay rights" movement in this country, makes it essential that Church teaching on this subject be as clearly and unambiguously stated as possible. Much has appeared in the media, even in the Catholic press, which has at times tended to cloud the issues rather than clarify them. The purpose of this article will be set forth clearly and unambiguously the Church's moral teaching on homosexuality. To accomplish this, I have drawn, not from the writings of private theologians or columnists, but on the authoritative teaching of the Church as can be found in a variety of statements of the Holy See, of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the pastoral letters of individual bishops.

Sad to say, confusion about the Church's moral teaching is not unique to our teaching on homosexuality. Catholic morality is always confusing because even within the Gospel itself there is tension between the declaration of clear and absolute moral imperatives and the command to forgive and love the sinner. "Hate the sin and love the sinner," we sometimes say. But it seems to be our tendency always to choose one or the other of these: emphasizing the moral imperative at the expense of love of the sinner or emphasizing compassion and forgiveness at the risk of watering down the moral norm. When stress is placed on the moral norm, gay activists accuse the Church of condemning gays as evil. When stress is placed on mitigating factors at the subjective level which might lessen the sinfulness of an individual's actions or when stress is placed on the defense of basic human rights, the Church is accused of endorsing homosexual activity.

Tendency and behavior

At the heart of the Church's teaching on homosexuality is the fundamental distinction between the homosexual tendency and homosexual behavior. Moral theologians customarily speak of the homosexual "orientation," by which they mean only the psychosexual attraction toward persons of the same sex. I have chosen not to use this vocabulary because the language of "orientation" is also being used by legislators where its meaning may or may not be limited to the psychosexual attraction, but may include homosexual actions. I will speak of a homosexual tendency or inclination. Parenthetically, I would point out that clarification of the meaning and implications of this term is essential before the Church can even consider endorsing or opposing so-called "Gay Rights" legislation. This is one of the reasons why, to date, the Diocese of Portland, despite reports to the contrary, is not taking a position either for or against such legislation. Much more clarification, which continuing public debate could provide, especially of the practical implications of this legislation is needed.

With the distinction between homosexual tendencies or attraction and homosexual behavior in mind, a working definition of homosexuality is: a predominant, persistent, and exclusive psychosexual attraction toward persons of the same sex. A homosexual person is: one who feels sexual desire for and sexual responsiveness to persons of the same sex and who seeks or would like to seek actual sexual fulfillment of this desire by sexual acts with a person of the same sex. The origins of homosexuality are not clear. There are a variety of schools of thought on the subject: some regard homosexuality as a physiological condition or, at least, a physiological predisposition. Others seem to regard it as an acquired behavior, the result of environmental factors or upbringing. It is beyond the competency of the Church to judge such matters. What is becoming clear, though, is as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has noted, that the homosexual tendency may very well not be "the result of a deliberate choice."

Tendency is not sinful

The constant teaching of the Church has been that the homosexual tendency is not sinful. On this, too, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has been clear: "The particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin." Archbishop Quinn of San Francisco wrote in his Pastoral Letter on Homosexuality, "The Church certainly does not condemn those who discover within themselves a homosexual attraction or inclination." At the same time, the Church goes on to say and has received considerable criticism for having said: "Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder."

This saying is best understood when situated in a context. Everyone without exception has disordered inclinations. There are inclinations toward anger, jealousy, greed, cowardice, rash judgment, lust and hypocrisy. We each have some combination of these and others to a greater or lesser extent. Homosexual persons are not the only ones with disordered inclinations to sexual activity with one of the same sex is not by any means the only, the worst of the most widespread disordered inclination. The fact that someone has one or more of these disordered inclinations does not make that person evil. It does not even make that person disordered, only the inclination is said to be disordered. The person, despite his or her disordered inclinations, is a "creature of God and, by grace, His child and heir to eternal life," the Holy See states.

A person made in the image of God and redeemed by the Blood of Christ, should never be reduced to one of his or her various inclinations. A person is not "a homosexual," as though that sums up the entirety of the person, simply because he or she may have certain homosexual tendencies. This has been the struggle that persons with various disabilities have had to fight. They are not disabled people; they are not identified or reduced to their blindness or deafness or inability to walk. They are persons with the full dignity of all human persons. The same can be said of alcoholics. It is wrong to say, "My name is John and I am an alcoholic," if what is implied is that this is all John is, that the totality of his person is to be identified with his disordered inclination to abuse alcohol. As a result, the same document of the Holy See which said that homosexuality is a disordered inclination, acknowledges that homosexual persons can "often be generous and giving of themselves."

No Place for prejudice

Convinced of the dignity and worth of every human person, whether homosexual or heterosexual, the bishops of the United States wrote in their 1976 pastoral letter *To Live in Christ Jesus*, "Homosexuals, like everyone else, should not suffer from prejudice against their basic human rights. They have a right to respect, friendship and justice." "Indeed the Church holds," writes Archbishop Quinn, "that there is no place for discrimination and prejudice against a person because of sexual attraction." It should go without saying that the Church condemns all violence against homosexual persons. Homosexual persons are not entitled to special rights. But they are entitled to the same rights to which every other human person is entitled by the mere fact of being a human person.

Having said all this, we must also say that nothing the Church has said about the moral sinfulness of the homosexual tendency or the dignity of homosexual persons or their entitlement to all the basic human rights should be constructed as endorsing a homosexual life style or homosexual acts. To say that the homosexual inclinations is not sinful and to say that homosexual persons should not suffer discrimination because of their sexual attraction does not mean that homosexual conduct should be promoted. It does not mean that there is nothing wrong with homosexual conduct. It does not mean that some types of repeated behavior or promotion of such behavior may not exclude a person from employment in a particular job.

There are growing pressures for recognition of the homosexual life style as legitimate, as one alternative among others which are equally good. There is a campaign, a movement, to foster the notion that homosexual behavior is simply a variant form of normal sexual expression, and equivalent form of adult sexual maturation, entitled to the same protection at law as heterosexual behavior within marriage. The Church does not and cannot accept such a position. Opposition to homosexuality as a form of behavior and opposition to homosexuality as an acceptable life style cannot simply be dismissed as prejudice. The teaching of the Scriptures is clear, despite efforts on the part of some to obscure such teaching. The Church finds biblical evidence for its teaching in the Book of Genesis. God fashions humankind in his own likeness, male and female. It is in the complementarity of the sexes that "they are called to reflect the inner unity of the Creator. They do this in a striking way in their cooperation with him in the transmission of life by a mutual donation of the self to the other." This is the plan for creation, the union for the two in a life of love and service.

Genital relations

This vision is reinforced with explicit condemnations of homosexual genital relations. In Genesis 19:1-11. In I Corinthians 6:9-10, he states that those who engage in homosexual behavior, along with others, including adulterers, drunkards, thieves, etc., are excluded from the kingdom of God. In the Letter to the Romans 1:18-32, Paul uses the example of homosexual relations as symbolic of the moral blindness that has overcome humanity, when it closed its eyes to God's will which revealed in the natural order. And, finally, in I Timothy 1:10. Homosexual acts are described, along with murder and lying and other wrongs, as "contrary to sound teaching."

The consistent teaching of the Church regarding sexual activity has been and continues to be that "it is only in the marital relationship that the use of the sexual faculty can be morally good," as stated in the letter of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The Church's teaching affirms both the unitive and the procreative meaning of sexual activity. Any form of sexual activity which excludes either or both of these meanings is judged immoral: whether this is loveless sex between a husband and wife, which would deny the unitive meaning of sexual activity, or the genital relationship between two homosexual persons, which denies the procreative meaning, however profound their relationship and commitment to each other. As Archbishop Quinn writes: "Both from the religious point of view as well as for the good of the society itself, marriage and the family are realities that must be protected and strengthened. The family not only continues the human race but it also glues it together. The family is the basic living example of social cohesion."

'Guard against rash judgment in individual cases'

After starting in unambiguous language the judgment of the Church that homosexual activity is objectively wrong, the Church, in the letter of the Holy See, reminds us to guard against rash judgment in individual cases. "Here the Church's wise moral tradition is necessary since it warns us against generalizations in judging individual cases. In fact, circumstances may exist, or may have existed in the past, which would reduce to remove the culpability of the individual in a given instance." Having come to the realization that they are homosexual, such persons will have to employ all the means the Church has to offer to overcome such inclinations, just as we all must if we are to overcome the disordered tendencies we experience. These means include the sacrament of penance, the Eucharist, daily prayer and good works.

While on that journey it is not surprising that everyone will occasionally fail, that growth is slow and difficult. The solution is not to deny the tendency or to declare it good; the solution is not to give up or to give in. The solution is not to decide that one can never be happy unless he or she is free to practice whatever orientations toward sin this person may experience. While there may be factors which will mitigate and individual's guilt in specific instances, what is to be avoided is "the unfounded and demeaning assumption that the sexual behavior of homosexual persons is always the totally compulsive and therefore inculpable," as the Holy See has said.

On this matter of moral development, Archbishop Quinn applies a quotation from Pope Paul VI originally intended for married couples struggling with artificial birth control, but which can be equally applied to homosexuals. "It is only little by little that the human being is able to order and integrate his multiple tendencies, to the point of arranging them harmoniously in that virtue of chastity wherein the couple finds full human virtue of chastity wherein the couple finds full human and Christian development . . . Their conscience demands to be respected, educated and formed in an atmosphere of confidence and not anguish. The moral laws, far from being inhumanly cold in an abstract objectivity, are there to guide the spouses in their progress. When they truly strive to live the profound demands of holy love, patiently and humbly, without becoming discouraged by failures, then the moral laws . . . are no longer recognized as a hindrance, but recognized as a powerful help."

Pastoral advice

This is the pastoral advice the Church gives. It is a long way from the kind of pastoral advice which some would give which would hold out a false hope that Church teaching will eventually change or that homosexual activity is not a serious matter. It is a long way from the kind of pastoral direction which some would give which would dismiss another human person as evil and which fails of all compassion. The members of the Church, homosexual and heterosexual, have the right to sound moral teaching, even when this teaching is difficult to receive.

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