

The Debate About Homosexuality

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As we go to press, the debate in the Anglican Church sparked by the appointment of an openly and practising gay priest as Bishop of New Hampshire in USA is gaining a great deal of media attention. Claims are made that this will tear the World Wide Anglican Communion apart, although that remains to be seen. The Anglicans have already demonstrated an amazing capacity to work out compromises which to the rest of world seem to stretch the notion of "communion" beyond reasonable breaking point.

But what this debate has shown is that the issue of homosexuality will simply not go away. It will not go away because it is really part of the much deeper controversy over the meaning and purpose of human sexuality. In one sense that debate has been going on since the beginning of time, but it really came to the fore in modern Christian history at the Lambeth Conference of 1933 which conceded the morality of contraceptive practices, thus signalling a fundamental redefinition of the meaning of the sexual act. Needless to say, the widespread availability and use of the contraceptive pill and the consequent sexual revolution of the 1960's have only raised the issue of human sexuality even more into the limelight. This specific issue of homosexuality is particularly difficult to deal with because ordinary people are caught between two conflicting instincts. On the one hand there is a common sense perception that heterosexuality is the fundamental norm for humanity even if only because the survival of the human race depends on it, and a fairly natural distaste for homosexual practice. On the other hand there is a desire to be open to diversity and to be non-judgemental, fuelled by an awareness of unacceptable bias and injustice levelled against homosexuals in the past. This leaves the majority, in the West anyway, rather confused and perplexed; a confusion which has been cynically manipulated by the aggressively pro-gay media of our time. The result is that, in the secular arena at least, the debate has already been concluded. The media constantly pedal the assumption that there are two fundamental sub-sets of humanity: those who are heterosexually orientated and those who are homosexually orientated - or in the modern parlance those who are 'straight' and those who are 'gay'. This, they tell us, is just how it is. It is a division in nature, and any attempt to argue that one orientation is 'better' or 'more normal' than the other is seen as bigoted, judgemental and discriminatory. It was inevitable that sooner or later this would become an issue within the Christian Church. As the boundaries of what is acceptable in public opinion were challenged and rolled back during the last forty years, it became increasingly clear that the issue of actively homosexual clergy would come to the fore at some stage, especially in the Protestant Churches where clergy are not obliged to live celibately. As the debate has taken shape, battle lines have been drawn up in predictable and now jaundiced ways. Theological liberals see the ban on homosexual practice, both for the clergy and for others, as yet another issue on which the Church needs to change and adjust to the modern world. For them it is merely a question of liberating the Church bit

by bit from archaic and outmoded attitudes, which were culturally and historically conditioned in the first place and which do not belong to the core of the Christian message. (What, in their opinion, exactly does belong to that core is another question!) It is all just part of the ongoing process of doctrinal and spiritual evolution, painful but necessary; - *ecclesia semper reformanda.*, which in this case is best rendered as “the Church needs an unending Reformation”. For conservative Protestants and evangelicals, however, this has become a benchmark issue, not for negotiation. As they constantly point out, homosexual practice is explicitly condemned in Sacred Scripture – (just as divorce and re-marriage is too, for that matter, but let us pass over that for now!) So for them, this is much more about the authority and inspiration of the Bible than it is about homosexuality itself. If they give way on this, then they would feel that they have abandoned Scripture as the rule and norm of the Church. This is why the evangelicals have decided to make a stand on this issue above all others, even if that does mean finally destroying the Anglican Communion. But herein lies the problem for evangelical Protestants. They have no consistent philosophical reason to condemn homosexuality, so all they can do is lean on the text of Scripture. In traditional Christian theology the reason was clear: sex was created by God for the procreation of the human race within the life long bond of loving marriage. But if sex can be wilfully divorced from procreation, as it is when contraception is used, then there is no intrinsic reason why any two human beings who love one another cannot express that love sexually no matter what gender they are. The truth is that when Protestants accepted the morality of contraception they also accepted the redefinition of the human sexual act, and in doing so, albeit implicitly, denied the grounds for asserting the immorality of homosexual acts. Archbishop Rowan Williams, with characteristic candour and honesty, said exactly this in his essay in *Theology and Sexuality*, a book edited by Eugene Rogers and published by Blackwell in 2002. In it he wrote:

“In a church that accepts the legitimacy of contraception, the absolute condemnation of same-sex relations of intimacy must rely on an abstract, fundamentalist deployment of a number of very ambiguous biblical texts.”

Exactly! If the traditional principle of Christian sexual theology is abandoned - the principle which states that the procreative and unitive aspects of sexual intercourse are inseparable and mutually inter-defined - then there is no logic in condemning homosexual acts. Evangelical Protestants are left bashing their Bibles and looking for all the world like fundamentalist imams who cannot defend or explain their position except by a retreat into the inspiration of Scripture; a position that is exceedingly lame in a society which simply does not accept such an authority. The truth, which all intelligent commentators know and understand, whatever conclusions they draw from it, is that contraception is the key to the whole debate. This is why the Pope has so emphasised the importance of the Church’s teaching on contraception in his fight against what he calls the culture of death. It is also why one is driven almost to despair by eminent Catholics talking about this teaching as if it were ‘a man made rule’ which could be

changed at whim or by majority vote. The truth is that the only coherent alternative to our current cultural orthodoxy of 'recreational sex' - now even displayed on national television as Big Brother watches over and gloats - is the Catholic position. Calmly and thoughtfully we need to shed the light of that position on the sensitive issue of homosexuality. The first thing that we need to challenge is the widespread, secular assumption that there are two sub-sets of humanity determined by sexual orientation, one gay and one straight. In fact it is rarely noticed that the word 'orientation' is actually a metaphor. It is not a directly descriptive empirical term. There is no actual switch or compass needle in the human heart which can be 'oriented' one way or another to determine someone's erotic attractions. What we are really talking about is a whole complex of feelings and perceptions, which may vary greatly from individual to individual. Even the distinction made between homosexual behaviour and orientation needs to be carefully understood. It aims at upholding the undoubted truth that a temptation someone does not seek is not a sin and that there can be no condemnation of anyone simply because they struggle with particular temptations. But there is a danger that in adopting the language of 'orientation', in this way we have tacitly conceded the gay assumption that there is a clearly identifiable and somehow separate group of human beings who are homosexual in their nature.

It is common practice among gay activists, for example, to claim figures from history, some even among the saints, about whom there is no evidence of immoral sexual behaviour, but who are deemed to have been homosexual because of their artistic sensitivity or warmth of expression towards other men or women, and so on. Such suggestions are deeply anachronistic. They impose our modern sexualised view of human relationships on to people and cultures that did not routinely confuse emotional warmth with sexual drive.

In any case, even if there were temptations of a homosexual nature that assailed some of the great saints of the past, firstly we should not be shocked by it. Human nature is prey to myriad wounds and distortions. What matters is the power of grace to overcome our fallen selves. Secondly, we would have no way of knowing whether it was true or not except if we were privy to the confessional confidences of these souls. And thirdly, if they did experience such feelings they would not have regarded them as defining their being and their nature. They would not have considered it a matter of their personal 'orientation'.

So we need to re-assert the truth that first and foremost we are just human beings with diverse personal tendencies. So the correct response to the young person who declares "I am gay", is "No, you are not 'gay', what you are is a human being created by God and called to an eternal destiny by God. You have certain temptations but these do not define you." Because of Original Sin none of us can simply do what comes "naturally". In fact the widespread lack of any understanding of original sin contributes considerably to the confusion and

tension in this debate. The next thing that needs to be re-asserted is that the key to the Church's, and indeed the Bible's, attitude towards homosexual sex is not some unenlightened bigotry, but rather the fact that God created sex for the procreation of children in a permanent state of loving. Sex as a unifying expression of love between two individuals is defined by their acceptance of the meaning of sex and hence by their openness to new life. These two dimensions of sexual intercourse are therefore inseparable, both in principle and in practice. Any use of the sexual act in which the procreative is deliberately or artificially excluded (contraceptive sex) or in which it is absent by definition (homosexual sex) is therefore wrong. The Church is most emphatically, therefore, not 'anti-gay', by which is usually meant a hatred or rejection of persons who feel homosexual desires. Nor do we believe that God creates a certain group of human beings in order to condemn them to eternal frustration. Every human being is created for love and, whatever his or her personal history and tendencies, is emphatically called to fulfilment in love. But what we are saying is that sex is something distinct from love. It is not just an expression of loving attachment between people. It has a built-in meaning of its own. If it is, therefore, to be the integral expression of married love, then the procreative meaning of the act cannot ever be entirely absent. No human being is called to live without love, but many - including the Head of the human race himself - live a completely fulfilled and fruitful life without sex. Men and women who find themselves struggling with homosexual tendencies and temptations, most often through no choice of their own, are not regarded by the Church as in some way inferior or disgusting. Neither are they called to live without affection and the loving friendship of same-sex relationships. But they are called to respect the fundamental moral law of nature and therefore they are called to live without sex. In response, therefore, to the specific question of whether what is deemed to be a homosexually oriented man should be admitted to the priesthood or indeed to the episcopacy, our response should be much more subtle and nuanced than the quasi-hysterical response of both the liberals on the one hand, who demand what they see as complete equality and the ultra-right on the other hand, who say that all "gays" should be automatically excluded from Holy Orders. Firstly, there is no such thing as a 'gay' in terms of a spiritual and moral, or even a univocal psychological category. Every candidate must therefore be examined and assessed individually. We should not make such bland generalisations which are ultimately rooted in secular ideology. Secondly, apart from the obvious need for holiness, piety and adequate human qualities, the criteria of acceptability for Holy Orders must surely be acceptance of the teachings of Christ and his Church and a sincere attempt to live up to these teachings. Beyond this, the exact nature of the temptations that any particular man experiences in his struggle to live the Gospel is frankly irrelevant. The only question should be: does this man accept the teaching of Christ and is he trying to live it in his life. And, conversely, the only bar to Holy Orders would be a rejection of that teaching and a refusal or incapacity to try to live it. And this last must be a prudential not a pre-emptive judgement. In our view this was the peculiar irony of the Jeffrey John case, the bishop-elect of the Anglican diocese of Reading who was forced by the

Archbishop of Canterbury to withdraw from his appointment to save the unity of his church! For, with the proviso that from our perspective Canon John would have ruled himself out of consideration on the grounds of his open dissent from the teaching of the Church, on the actual, objective state of his life, we would have had no problem with him. Here was a man who was living a celibate life and who had a long standing and supportive friendship with another priest. What the nature of his tendencies and temptations were or are is a personal matter for him and is of no concern in the external forum, as long as he is living according to the teachings of Christ. What made the affair so impossible was, again, the media's constant assertion that he was a 'gay priest' and the acceptance of this epithet by all concerned, his supporters, his detractors and, most problematically, himself. Whatever the rights and wrongs of his particular case one could not help feeling sorry for a man who was proposed for a position by superiors who knew exactly his situation and who was forced to resign, by a bishop who made it clear that he thought he was an excellent candidate, on the grounds of 'unity', whatever that might mean in an Anglican context! As far as Catholic seminarians are concerned, we would hope and expect that, for the majority, homosexual temptations are not the problem they have to confront. But for those who do have to deal with problems of this kind, ought this mean that they should they be excluded from Holy Orders? Surely chastity is chastity and holiness is holiness, whatever its starting point? And everyone will have struggles of some kind with chastity, and indeed with all the virtues.

It seems likely that confronting everyone who applies to a seminary with the intrusive question: 'are you a homosexual?', could actually encourage in some people the very self identification as 'gay' which we are seeking to avoid. There are many degrees and shades of emotional wounding. If someone is living a chaste life based on healthy self-knowledge and mature spirituality, what more can we ask for? Do we have the right to ask such a question in the external forum anyway, especially when it is not clear exactly what it is that we are asking? A witch-hunt mentality could even discourage integral self-disclosure within the confines of confession and spiritual direction, thus harming authentic spiritual growth and breeding a culture of disastrous repression and dishonesty.

In order to deal with this problem, what we need both within the Church and in society at large, is a two pronged attack. Firstly we need a thoroughgoing, crystal clear and coherent renewal of our theology and catechesis concerning sex and sexuality. Its main outlines have been rehearsed in Faith many times, and the Holy Father calls frequently for the same vision, and has himself written deeply and beautifully on the subject. We must uphold the goodness of the sexual act, not merely as the expression of human affection, but as the sacramental consummation of the Covenant which gives life from God through the physical and spiritual union of husband and wife. Any other sexual activity outside the marriage bond, hetero-, homo- or solo, but also including the wilful exclusion of fertility through contraception within marriage, is immoral. Secondly we recognise the great weakness of human nature with its burden of original sin, which

exaggerates, disorders and disorientates our drives and desires. We can counsel people with positive compassion and pastoral love, showing how sexual temptations, perhaps especially those which can be labelled homosexual, arise from a confusion of the affective and the erotic faculties. This confusion may be only incidental or it may be deeply rooted in neurosis. In any case there is no need for hysterical condemnation or for fear. But neither must such sexual urges be indulged. They must be faced with humility and overcome with the tried and tested formula of prayer, self mastery through grace and, most crucially, with the help of chaste and supportive friendship. The Gospel proclaims that we must not be conformed to the spirit of the age. Our own age is swamped with false propaganda that sex is essential to human loving and must inevitably be indulged in by everyone according to one 'orientation' or another. In heaven all of us will be chaste for all eternity, although we will be very much alive in our bodies and full of love for each other.

At the same time the Gospel also teaches us that no weakness should prevent us from coming to Christ. There is no need for anyone to feel excluded or cast out from the Church on the basis of the inner stresses and strains to which the spirit as well as the flesh is heir. Christ no more abhors the wound of homosexuality than he does any other kind of human affliction. He loves one kind of sinner no more nor less than any other. Neither does the Holy Spirit refuse to sanctify some human souls simply because of the nature of their wounds. God is indiscriminate in his love, and universal in his call to conversion and holiness. Whatever our wounds, Christ is our identity, and in Him alone will we find peace and healing.