

Gays, Lesbians and Homosexual Orientation

Until recent centuries there was some excuse for inaccurate moral teachings because accurate knowledge was not always available. Human sexuality is an area where the human race in the past has mainly depended on myth, ignorance, intolerance, and word of mouth. And by no means is the current sexual scene one of universal enlightenment and healthy practices. Despite ignorance in the past, human beings did learn from experience and concluded that some sexual practices were good, some were suspect, and a few were bad. There may be some wisdom stored in the human memory bank, along with myths and factual errors.

Human sexuality has always been integral to power relations. What was deemed sexually unacceptable depended in part on which groups could get their voices heard. For centuries, men controlled the public voice while women's voices were kept private. Recently, men have had to come to grips with the fact that human sexuality could not be understood when women did not have a public voice.

Another large segment of the human race that until very recently did not have a public voice is people who are oriented homosexually, that is, persons who are gay or lesbian. The emergence of gays and lesbians has opened further questions about sex, reflected now in reference to the LGBT community: lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and trans-sexual people. No one knows where this rapidly changing picture is taking the human race which could use a few guiding principles as it tries to assimilate a large body of new knowledge and new challenges to set ways. The Roman Catholic Church by drawing on its long tradition might have been a conservative guide instead of being widely perceived as one of the chief enemies of a gay/lesbian or LGBT movement.

As in most moral questions the phrasing of the question sets the limits of any possible answer. What is notable about homosexuality is that until the end of the nineteenth century there was no language at all to address the question. It can hardly be doubted that homosexuality has always been a fact of human life. But in past centuries any reference to that reality was veiled and indirect. Roundabout phrases were used but such descriptions did not necessarily mean what the term homosexual has come to mean in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

"Homosexual" was coined in the 1870s. The word is a peculiar combination of Greek and Latin. The term was invented as the name of a disease or a crime. To this day, "homosexual" used as a noun is usually disparaging in meaning. "Homosexuals," it is feared, are a different kind of human being, who if they are not willing to be cured must be kept away from ordinary human beings. The young are supposedly susceptible to their influence so that there is fear that "homosexuals" may be teaching our children and leading them to debauchery. Fortunately, this attitude is now that of a minority in the United States but it is only in the last half century that the public attitude has changed. Change has indeed come about with almost unbelievable speed in the United States and many other countries.¹

“Homosexual” as an adjective has always had more flexibility than the noun. The adjective did not stamp a group of people as a sub-species of the human. The adjective homosexual can be a reference to one aspect of a person’s life. A person who is oriented to same-sex attraction and love is not different in most respects from a heterosexual individual. What the differences and similarities are can only be known through ordinary conversation and scientific study.

The adjective homosexual in the course of a century shifted into a good or at least a neutral meaning; however, old meanings do not easily disappear. The phrase “homosexually oriented” was coined to be an acceptance of homosexuality as a “natural” characteristic. Or at least the idea of orientation was the basis of tolerance by people who did not accept the full legitimacy of homosexuality. It is helpful to distinguish between a person’s basic constitution and his or her behavior. However, the distinction can lead to an unrealistic separation between orientation and behavior. Today “gay,” “gay/lesbian” or “LGBT” tend to be the preferred terms of self-identification. However, “homosexual” is a term that is not likely to disappear any time soon.

The term gay is sometimes used to characterize a community or a culture. Groups that are oppressed or discriminated against often choose or are pressed to form a “community” as a means of resistance and survival. The linking of many such communities creates a culture of language and practices, whose meanings are largely hidden from the oppressor. As intolerance toward the group eases, the need for a distinct culture lessens. But similar to the women’s movement that could not succeed without changing men, a gay movement is not likely to succeed if it does not change the perception of sexuality in the “straight” culture. The testimonies of gay and lesbian Catholics are important for changing Roman Catholic teaching not only on homosexuality but on sex in general and sexual pleasure more particularly.²

Official Catholic Church Teaching

The two bases for the Roman Catholic Church’s official teaching on homosexuality are its invocation of natural law and its citation of texts from the Bible.

Natural Law. The Roman Catholic Church’s concern for what is natural and what is unnatural is the strength of the church’s moral teaching. The church can rightly claim a tradition of trying to protect what is natural from violation and destruction. The firm basis of the church’s moral teaching is its principle that what is *contra naturam* – a contradiction of nature – is immoral. This principle, however, does not logically mean that the moral and the natural are the same. The “natural” world of God’s creation has been put in the hands of human beings for better and for worse. The genuine religious position is not that humans should submit to nature but that humans should act in accord with their nature, a nature which is constantly reshaped artistically, politically, religiously and sexually.

One of the most frequently used words describing homosexuality is “unnatural.” In the not so distant past homosexual behavior was assumed to be a “perversion” of how people

should act. Today, the weight of science and research is that a significant percentage of the human race is oriented toward same-sex love. Even more important than the science is the testimony of gay and lesbian people whose voices could not be heard in the past. Same-sex attraction and homosexual behavior are examples of a wonderful diversity that the human race has recently been coming to appreciate. The Roman Catholic Church, one might think, could celebrate these expressions of human nature.

The church's official teachers often speak of a set of laws "imprinted" in the individual that allow for a simple naming of what is right and wrong.³ But in much of life, it is not at all apparent if something is in accord with (human) nature or destructive of nature. In many cases, the best test is the test of time. Some things condemned as unnatural eventually get acceptance; other things that may seem harmless can turn out to be destructive. The individual, therefore, is not always the best judge of what is bad for him or her. But a tradition is not a help if it is not constantly being rethought in the light of new experience and knowledge. Homosexuality is a dramatic example of assumptions about human nature that need to be reconsidered on the basis of new information.

Alfred Kinsey's study of the sexual behavior of men in 1948 caused an uproar. He did not do a study of morality; his intention was simply to count instances of behavior. That fact was enough to get his study condemned in many quarters, but it was also the strength of what he accomplished. He was not an advocate of homosexual activity or any other kind of sexual behavior. He was in search of facts. What he discovered was a range of behavior that surprised many people, although there must have been millions of people who breathed a sigh of relief on discovering that they were not strange after all.

Kinsey found that up to forty percent of men had engaged in same-sex intimacies. He estimated that five to ten percent of men were homosexually oriented. Although critics protested that those numbers must be false, the data have generally stood up in subsequent studies; precise statistics are still impossible to get.⁴ The most important thing was not the exact numbers but that Kinsey was able to distinguish same-sex activity of heterosexual men from the activity of men who are genuinely homosexual by nature. Henceforth, it was important to distinguish but not separate orientation and behavior. The term "homosexual behavior" should not logically be used for people who are heterosexual; the same-sex activity in those cases is the result of either experimentation or assault.

Bible. The second basis for the Roman Catholic Church's condemnation of homosexual behavior is the Bible. Here the Roman Catholic Church joins forces with some of evangelical Protestantism. Similar to the protest against abortion, the Roman Catholic Church and the most conservative wing of Protestantism make strange bedfellows. On most moral issues the Roman Catholic Church's appeal to the Bible is secondary. The general tenor and outlook of the Bible is referred to but "proof texts" have become less important, given the advance of biblical scholarship in the Roman Catholic Church.

The church has tried to reset the center of morality around the life and teaching of Jesus. The chief tenets of that teaching are to love God and to love one's neighbor. If

homosexuality were a big moral problem, would one not expect guidance from the gospels? Church officials make no appeal to the gospels for their condemnation of homosexual behavior. The reason is simple: There is nothing in the gospels to appeal to. Jesus was a single man whose public life was mostly spent among a group of men. Did Jesus ever whisper to John, “the beloved disciple,” that he should be careful about expressing his affection for one of the other disciples? If so, there is no record of any warning by Jesus about same-sex love.

Before any text in the Bible is cited as condemning homosexuality, the first and most important thing to be noted is that the Bible has *nothing* to say about homosexuality. The Bible had no term for homosexuality and no idea of homosexuality. The biblical authors could not condemn what they did not know and what they could not name. Contemporary authors sometimes acknowledge this fact of language and then proceed to cite texts that supposedly condemn homosexuality in the Book of Leviticus and the Epistles of St. Paul.

The appeal to the Bible for condemning homosexuality consists of a strange selection of isolated texts.⁵ The Book of Leviticus plays a central role. Why Christians would follow the teaching of Leviticus on this question while disregarding almost everything else in Leviticus is a puzzle. As part of a long list of practices that excluded a man from the community, Lev. 18:22 says: “You shall not lie with a man as with a woman; it is an abomination.” The condemnation is repeated in Lev. 20:13: “If a man lies with a male as with a woman both of them have committed an abomination.” However, when these two texts are invoked the second half of each verse is always omitted, namely, “They shall be put to death, their blood is upon them.” If the first half of the verse is given total validity, why is the second half of the verse dismissed as not worth mentioning? Actually, what seems to be the most relevant biblical text in Leviticus for discussing homosexuality is verse 19:20: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

The author of the Book of Leviticus did not have the word “unnatural”; there was no such concept or term in ancient Hebrew. The word “abomination” that he used was to indicate a violation of the ritual code. “Abomination” took on a quite different meaning in later history.

St. Paul, writing in Greek, did have available the term nature; he could therefore before to some things as unnatural. However, his use of the term was unsystematic. In Rom 1:26-27, Paul applied the word “unnatural” to men having sex with men (interestingly he also included women with women, which would have been unthinkable in Leviticus). But he also thought that long hair on men was unnatural (ICor.11:14). He even describes God as acting contrary to nature in grafting Christians into the cultivated olive tree of Judaism (Rom 11:24). If St. Paul were to come back today, what would he think of men having sex with men if they were “by nature” same-sex oriented? No one can say. However, he would surely condemn most of the sex between men in our prisons because it is not properly called homosexual behavior but (heterosexual) rape.

The texts in Leviticus and Romans are the usual evidence brought forth that the Bible condemns homosexuality. Church documents toss in a few other references to shore up

the case but that only reveals how weak the case is. The story of Sodom is still cited even though modern scholarship (as well as ancient sources) gives no support to the belief that the story is a condemnation of homosexuality. The Bible in numerous places refers to the fate of Sodom but never is same-sex behavior referred to as being the wickedness of the city. The city is regularly condemned in the Bible because the poor are oppressed and the needy are crushed. (Amos 4:11).

Other texts of the Bible that are occasionally included as a condemnation of homosexuality are in lists of “uncleanness” or “wickedness.” (For example, I Tim 1:10; I Cor 6:9). One of the references in these lists is claimed to be homosexuality. But since there was no such term, the references are always ambiguous, veiled and obscure.

There are hundreds of passages in the Bible, especially in the Christian gospels, that condemn the oppression of the poor. The Bible also makes abundantly clear that killing your brother is unacceptable behavior. And there are clear commands in the gospel to put aside vengeance and seek peace. If same-sex love were a terrible violation of God’s law, should we not expect something clearer in the Bible than what is regularly offered up in church condemnations?

Roman Catholic Church Documents

I will examine in this section some of the documents on homosexuality that have come from the Vatican’s Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith and from the United States Catholic Bishops. It is easy to summarize church officials on homosexual behavior: they are against it. However, both the Vatican officials and the U.S. bishops have found it necessary to respond to the revolution happening all around them. The documents are painful to read because they keep trying to find a way to condemn all homosexual behavior while at the same time protesting that they are condemning homosexual people. The Vatican and the U.S. bishops had some differences in their approach to this tension. The U.S. bishops tried to find a way to sound less negative about “homosexual persons” but in some ways their position came out as more illogical.

As the gay rights movement was picking up steam in 1975, the Vatican thought it was necessary to put forward a Declaration that reaffirmed the church’s position on homosexuality.⁶ The document raises some hope in its opening sentence: “According to contemporary scientific research...” But by the end of that paragraph the foremost concern is not scientific research but “licentious hedonism.” It is difficult to find any appreciation of “contemporary scientific research” in the document. It does express some sympathy with adolescents struggling with masturbation but still insists that “scripture condemns this sin” and that each act can be a mortal sin (sec. 9).⁷

The Declaration confidently asserts that the church “ceaselessly preserves and transmits without error the truths of the moral order, and she authentically interprets not only the revealed positive law ‘but also...those principles of the moral order which have their origin in human nature itself.’” (sec. 4). The authors of the document do not seem to

think that it is necessary to learn about “human nature itself” from contemporary research and human testimony.

The Declaration does make a bow to contemporary discussions by saying that “with some reason” it is possible to distinguish between two kinds of “homosexuals.” The first kind is “homosexuals whose tendency comes from a false education, from a lack of normal sexual development...and is transitory, or at least not incurable....” In contrast, there are “homosexuals who are definitively such because of some innate kind of instinct or a pathological constitution judged to be incurable” and, while they may not always be personally responsible for their behavior, “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered”(sec. 8).

The Vatican document distinguishes here between two kinds of “homosexuals” but the distinction is false. Their first kind of “homosexual” should have been described as heterosexuals engaging in same-sex behavior. Their second kind of homosexuals are actual homosexual people, “homosexuals who are definitively such.” In acknowledging “some kind of innate instinct” the authors of the document were close to agreeing with the widespread view that people do not chose to be homosexual; they are homosexual “by nature.” However, that hint of openness is immediately dashed by equating this innate instinct with “a pathological constitution judged to be incurable.” The category of homosexual person is accepted but the condition of being a homosexual is said to be a sickness.

Rather surprisingly the Vatican felt it necessary in 1986 to address homosexuality again in *On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*.⁸ The reason they give is that in the reaction to their 1975 Declaration an “overly benign interpretation was given to the homosexual condition itself.” Apparently, many people, including some U.S. bishops, were willing to go with the Vatican’s language of “some kind of innate instinct” and to disregard “a pathological constitution judged to be incurable.” Because the Declaration distinguished between “homosexual condition” and individual homosexual actions, some people thought it possible to condemn the actions but view the homosexual condition as “neutral or even good.”

This new Vatican document makes no admission that by calling people “homosexuals who are definitively such” it created its own dilemma. It would seem that if there are “real homosexual persons” they have to act as homosexual persons. This new document refers to a “homosexual condition or tendency” as a way out of the dilemma but that phrase only raises further questions. What reality is acknowledged for a “condition” that is lifelong and that is also called an “objective disorder”?

The most astounding passages in this 1986 document are sections 11 and 16 in which the term “sexual orientation” is condemned. In section 11 the church is said to be defending the liberty and dignity of homosexual persons against “the unfounded and demeaning assumption that the sexual behavior of homosexual persons is always and totally compulsive and therefore inculpable.” Here orientation is said to be the cause of compulsive activity instead of meaning activity that is in accord with being a

“homosexual person.” Section 16 states that “the human person, made in the image and likeness of God, can hardly be adequately described by a reductionist reference to his or her sexual orientation.” Why is the term sexual orientation *reductionist* when it is simply an acknowledgment that people are primarily oriented homosexually or heterosexually?

The U.S. bishops were undoubtedly affected by the pressures of the gay rights movement that was particularly strong in the United States. The U.S. bishops would not, of course, disagree with the Vatican. However, individual bishops had used the term “sexual orientation” in the early 1980s which probably upset Vatican officials. It is surprising, therefore, that in the bishops’ 1990 statement on sexuality, even after the Vatican “clarification,” there are eight paragraphs headed “Persons with a Homosexual Orientation.” Were the bishops trying to distance themselves from the Vatican or were they simply using the language at hand? The answer is not clear from the discussion at their 1990 meeting that led to this document. Most of their debate was about how much weight they should give to the Vatican’s use of “objective disorder.” The bishops rightly suspected that the terms “sexual orientation” and “objective disorder” did not go together.

In subsequent documents the U.S. bishops continued to express compassion for gay and lesbian people. In *Human Sexuality: A Catholic Perspective for Education and Lifelong Learning* in 1991, they invite homosexual people to have an active role in the church. In their pastoral letter of 1997, *Always Our Children*, the bishops express understanding of the difficulties that homosexual people face and they encourage patience. They use the term “sexual orientation” but still condemn homosexual behavior. Looking back on these documents, retired Bishop Thomas Gumbleton frankly admits: “We need to face the reality that there is a basic incoherence in the church’s teaching on homosexuality.”⁹

By the time of their 2006 document the U.S. bishops seem to have learned to conform to Vatican language. The title, *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care*, indicates their term of choice: “inclination.” One might think “inclination” is just a synonym for “orientation.” The bishops may have been suggesting that there was not much difference between those two words and some readers thought that the bishops had made progress. But while they use “inclination” in the singular it would have been more logical and honest for them to have used it in the plural. That is, in the bishops’ thinking, instead of people having an “inclination” that constitutes them as homosexual, they repeatedly have “inclinations” to (sinful) homosexual activities.

The “homosexual inclination” is said to be not a sin but a temptation to sin. The bishops say that the “tendency or inclination” is a sin only “if one were voluntarily to entertain homosexual temptations or to choose to act on them” (p. 5). The bishops’ advice for resisting this temptation is: “It would not be wise for persons with a homosexual inclination to seek friendship exclusively among persons with the same inclination. They should seek to form friendships among both homosexuals and heterosexuals (p.10-11). The bishops wish to say positive things about “homosexual persons” who have a temptation to homosexual behavior but the dilemma in the bishops discussion is: Can persons who are homosexual act morally act as the persons they are?

The U.S. Catholic bishops, to their credit, did not wish to condemn a whole segment of the human race. Particularly during the 1980s there were bishops who were sympathetic to the gay and lesbian cause, in private conversations if not in print. But the path to rethinking the church's position on homosexuality was blocked by the Vatican. Today any restating of the church's doctrinal position is more difficult than it would have been in the 1970s and 1980s.

Statements from the U.S. Bishops Conference, similar to statements from the Vatican, focus on "pastoral care." It is safe to talk about respecting the dignity of persons with a homosexual tendency and of ministering to them. The bishops even say that "it is important that Church ministers listen to the experiences, needs, and hopes of the persons with a homosexual inclination to whom and with whom they minister." But the bishops are not ready to listen to the widespread testimony of people who say that their "inclination" is part of their identity, and that their way of sexually expressing their person is by same-sex love. Why? The bishops' answer is: "The natural law shows what we should do (as does divinely revealed law, such as the Ten Commandments)"¹⁰

On homosexuality and other sexual questions, contemporary Roman Catholic Church officials have not listened enough to their own people. A particularly sad example is the case of Jeanine Gramick and Robert Nugent who tried to build a bridge between the Roman Catholic Church and gay/lesbian groups in the United States.¹¹ Their "New Ways Ministry" had success in doing just that. It would be difficult to find two people who were more devoted to the church and who were careful not to attack church doctrine. However, as happens frequently, the Vatican goes after people who are having success in reaching out to groups that are alienated from the church. Obviously, people who are doing such work have to emphasize some aspects of the church and go easy on other things.

Gramick and Nugent were vulnerable as members of religious orders. They have the distinction of receiving their own Vatican document of condemnation which concluded that "their position regarding the intrinsic evil of homosexual acts and the objective disorder of the homosexual inclination are doctrinally unacceptable."¹² That is, they were required to profess unqualified belief in "intrinsic evil," "objective disorder," and "homosexual inclination," which are philosophical concepts that are at best of doubtful validity. Gramick and Nugent took their unfair condemnation and survived with their dignity intact. The Roman Catholic Church's alienation from gays and lesbians continued.

The Synod

Early in his papacy Pope Francis famously made two references to homosexuality in his seemingly offhand style. Both remarks were in the form of a rhetorical question: "Who am I to judge?" and "When God looks at a gay person, does he endorse this person with love, or reject and condemn this person"¹³ His "non-judgmental" attitude was hailed as a

breakthrough and raised expectations of change. His use of the English word “gay” may have been more significant than even he realized.

The synod on the family in October, 2014, followed the pope’s lead in an open discussion of how the church should be a place of welcome for homosexual people. A strong reaction against the first week’s report led the synod to pull back in its final report which disappointed many people. But there is little doubt that in the history of the Roman Catholic Church the Synod on the Family in 2014 will be seen as the moment when the church officially changed its attitude on homosexuality and began the long-overdue process of accepting gay and lesbian Catholics.

Two uses of language reveal the change that occurred as well as the distance that church officials still have to travel. The discussion at the synod and its documents still refer to “the homosexual,” a usage that reflects a contrast between “them” and “us.” It was too much to expect that the synod would talk about gay and straight Catholics but the bishops could stop speaking about “the homosexuals” as an alien species. (On statistical grounds alone one has to presume that some of the bishops are gay). Pope Francis led with his use of the term gay but neither the news media nor the synod seemed to notice this big change.

The important change of language at the synod, which some bishops probably were not even aware of, is in this line: “Are our communities capable of this [being a welcoming home to homosexual people], accepting and valuing their sexual orientation....” No Vatican document had ever suggested that the church “accept” let alone “value,” the sexual orientation of gay and lesbian people. The Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith had avoided the term “sexual orientation” or attacked the idea. Lacking a knowledge of Vatican documents, journalists missed how revolutionary was this change. Even *Commonweal* said that the synod report contained just one paragraph “repeating Vatican statements on homosexual orientation.”¹⁴

The acceptance of the category of sexual orientation is the necessary condition to the acceptance of homosexual activity and gay or lesbian marriage. The rapidity of change in public attitude toward gay/lesbian marriage has been astounding. No one should expect the Roman Catholic Church to change at any similar speed. But if “companionate marriage” (marriage that is “open to life” but not to a realistic chance of pregnancy) is now accepted for straight people, there is no obvious reason that same-sex marriage should not be acceptable.¹⁵

¹ This chapter is mainly about the changing scene in the United States. The situation in India or many countries of Africa would require a different study.

² Christine Firer Hinze and J. Patrick Hornbeck, eds. *More than a Monologue: Sexual Diversity in the Catholic Church* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

³ U.S. Bishops, *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care* (Washington: U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006), 14.

⁴ Seth Stephens Davidowitz, “How Many American Men Are Gay?” *New York Times*, Dec. 8, 2013, 5.

⁵ For a more extensive commentary on these biblical texts, see Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (New York: Convergent Books, 2014).

⁶ *Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics* (Rome: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1975).

⁷ Masturbation is a nineteenth-century word. If there is any reference to masturbation in the New Testament or in the first few centuries of Christianity, it is certainly obscure.

⁸ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*. (Rome: Vatican Press, 1986).

⁹ Thomas Gumbleton, “Pastoral and Theological Response to Gays and Lesbians,” in *More than a Monologue*, chapter 5.

¹⁰ U.S. Bishops, “Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care (Washington: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006), p. 9

¹¹ Jeanine Gramick and Robert Nugent, *Building Bridges: Gay and Lesbian Reality and the Catholic Church* (W. Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1992).

¹² Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Notification Regarding Sr. Gramick and Fr. Nugent* (Rome: Vatican Publications, 1999).

¹³ Interview in *America*, September 30, 2013.

¹⁴ Editorial, *Commonweal*, October 28, 2014.

¹⁵ Margaret Farley, “Love Shaped and Grounded in Faith,” *The Tablet*, September 27, 2014, 11-12.