

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

HOMOSEXUALITY

(Catechism nn. 2357-2359)

Homosexuality

On the subject of homosexual behaviour, the Catechism writes (n. 2357):

‘Basing itself on Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered”(*Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith*, ‘The human person’ 1975 n. 8). Homosexual acts are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.’

It is important to observe that the Catechism is speaking about homosexual acts, not homosexuality as a sexual orientation. It is important also to remember that neither the CDF nor the Catechism are speaking infallibly. They do not require an assent of faith. Note, too, that the teaching is basing itself on Scripture. For a deeper understanding of this question we need to examine homosexuality as a sexual orientation as well as look carefully at what we mean by ‘natural law’ in this context. We need also to analyse the Scriptural data on which the condemnation of homosexual acts claims to be based.

Homosexual Orientation

Sexual identity is a complex matter, not determined solely by external genitalia, chromosome configuration or internal reproductive structure. This should warn us against defining ‘natural law’ by purely physical criteria. There is a profound connection between one’s sexual sense and one’s personal identity, and some people experience a radical disjunction between their observable characteristics and their psychic sexual identity.

Over and above the mysteries attached to sex, there are special difficulties in heterosexuals understanding homosexuals. We are deeply conditioned, and so carry unconscious assumptions and strong feelings about anything related to sexuality. Cultural distortions in regard to sex can make people feel inadequate, defensive, and threatened by homosexuality. Furthermore, a lot of the information about homosexuality that is available to heterosexuals has come from heterosexuals who lack reflection on personal experience, and so have limited understanding, or from homosexuals who have managed to sublimate their sexual drive into celibacy, and who may not understand the difficulty, even the impossibility, of others doing the same. Publicly available reflection on homosexuality by homosexuals, though increasing, is still relatively rare. Debate continues as to the decisive factors involved.

The misunderstandings and prejudices noted above have often meant that homosexuals have been made to feel bad about their sexual orientation, and to hide away in shame. There is also the pain that prejudice causes parents and other members of the family. The Catholic Bishops of England and Wales in ‘*An Introduction to the Pastoral Care of Homosexual People*’ (1979) states:

‘There remains within our community some misunderstanding and hostility, sometimes hidden, towards the homosexual, a hostility which is frequently the result of grouping together all homosexuals as though they are stereotyped’ (page 4).

They go on to state:

‘The Church has a serious responsibility to work for the elimination of any injustices perpetrated on homosexuals by society. As a group that has suffered more than its share of oppression and contempt, the homosexual community has particular claim upon the concern of the Church’(page 13).

In its ‘*Letter on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*’(1986), the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith deplores these prejudices in the community against people with a homosexual orientation:

‘It is deplorable that homosexual persons have been and are the object of violence in speech or in action. Such treatment deserves condemnation from the Church’s pastors wherever it occurs. It reveals a kind of disregard for others that endangers the most fundamental principles of a healthy society. The intrinsic dignity of each person must always be respected in word, in action and in law’(n.10).

The Congregation also warns against defining persons by their sexual orientation:

‘The human person, made in the image and likeness of God, can hardly be adequately described by a reductional reference to his or her sexual orientation. Everyone living on the face of the earth has personal problems and difficulties, but has challenges to growth, strengths, talents and gifts as well. Today, the Church provides a badly needed context for the care of the human person when she refuses to consider the person as heterosexual or homosexual and insists that every person has a fundamental identity: a creature of God, and by grace, his child and heir to eternal life’(n.16).

The Catholic Bishops of England and Wales conclude their paper with the same point:

‘The pastor will help souls if he introduces them to an understanding of that love which is more comprehensive than sexuality. His role is to introduce people to Christian life in all its fullness. This does not mean instant serenity. There must be gradual purification and real growth in holiness. Every person with spiritual ambitions must cope with his personal limitations. These vary from person to person and are frequently complex and discouraging, but all people who, in spite of limitations and even failures, continue to struggle and grow in holiness of life deserve encouragement. Such people are very near to God’(page 14).

On the website ‘*FAQs* [frequently asked questions]: *Catholic Families with Lesbian daughters and Gay sons*’ we find some important statements from the American Psychological Association 1998, including the following:

‘Sexual orientation is an enduring emotional, romantic, sexual or affectional attraction to another person.... [that is] easily distinguished from other components of sexuality including, biological sex, gender identity (the psychological sense of being male or female) and the social gender role (adherence to cultural norms for feminine or masculine behavior).’

‘Sexual orientation emerges for most people in early adolescence without any prior sexual experience. Although we can choose whether or not to act on our feelings, psychologists do not consider sexual orientation to be a conscious choice that can be voluntarily changed.’

Newer Testament

Today, homosexuals often like to use the word 'gay' to describe themselves.

'A gay person is a person of homosexual orientation who has recognised his/her homosexuality, accepted it as part of his/her personal identity, and is comfortable in this acceptance' (*Gay ministry task force*).

'To be gay is to be free of shame, guilt, regret, over the fact that one is homosexual. To be gay is to view one's sexuality as the healthy heterosexual views his' (Weinberg).

Homosexual behaviour and the Newer Testament world

If we are going to use statements in the Newer Testament as the Catechism does to declare homosexual behaviour to be 'seriously depraved' and 'intrinsically disordered', we need to understand the kinds of homosexual behaviour that Paul, for example, was confronted with, and what it was that he was condemning.

The culture in the Greek and Roman worlds was, speaking generally, indulgent towards male sexual behaviour. The male was considered (by male writers) to be superior, not only intellectually, but also from the point of view of physical beauty. It was not expected that wives would be chosen for either intellectual or romantic motives. It was widely considered that the appropriate partner for a male was another male. An adult male was encouraged to have a young male to give him pleasure, including the pleasure of sexual gratification. It was expected that the intimacy be intellectually stimulating, and that the older male would look to the education of the younger male, and behave towards him in a sensitive way. It is true that Plato wrote against this practice: 'man with man, or woman with woman, this is against nature' (*Laws*, 636b). However, it is also true that most moralists extolled the virtues of love directed to boys (pederasty). In opposition to Plato's view, pederasty is sometimes described as being more 'according to nature' for a male. Sexual union with a woman is needed for obvious reasons, but it is of a lesser dignity.

There is a good deal of evidence in the ancient texts of a prevailing (though not universal) misogyny, but there is no evidence of the kind of homophobia that we witness today.

One can readily see the dangers inherent in the pederasty that was generally accepted in the Greco-Roman world: dangers in the unequal nature of the relationship, in its impermanency, and in the occasion it provides for abuse and humiliation. However, the point being made here is that the culture saw its advantages as outweighing its disadvantages. Laws were enacted to protect young males against sexual harassment and rape, and moralists condemned those who ran brothels, and those males who made a living out of offering their sexual services to older males, but pederasty of the kind we have described was widely encouraged. It is dangerous to speak in such generalities of the many diverse cultures that made up the Greco-Roman world, but the evidence supports the above statements as being largely true. We might say that the culture, unlike our own, encouraged in males the prolonging of undifferentiated pubertal sexuality. It was an unashamedly bisexual world.

In cities like Corinth, the presence of coiffured and perfumed young men selling themselves for sex in the streets and public squares was a common sight, and moralists of divergent philosophical persuasions frequently spoke out against what they decried as decadent behaviour. A moralist of the day writes:

‘To be in love with those who are beautiful and chaste is the experience of a kind-hearted and generous soul; but to hire for money and to indulge in licentiousness is the act of a man who is wanton and ill-bred’ (Aeschines, *Timarchus*, 137).

Young men who were flaunting their sexuality to attract money or other favours were often referred to as ‘*malakoi*’, that is to say, ‘soft’, hence ‘effeminate’. It was indulging in sexual behaviour with such males, without any relationship, and without any of the refining elements of education and genuine appreciation of beauty, not homosexual behaviour in general, that was castigated by the general run of Greek moralists as ‘against nature.’

We will return to examine Paul’s statements, but first let us look at the Jewish tradition he inherited.

Homosexual Behaviour and the Hebrew Bible

There is no discussion in the Hebrew Bible of homosexuality as a physiological-psychological sexual preference or tendency, and very little on the subject of homosexual behaviour. There is the terrible story of Sodom (Genesis 19), which accounts for our word ‘sodomy’. It is a condemnation of lack of hospitality and of rape. There is the even worse story of a Levite (Judges 19), which also involves a condemnation of rape. Both stories demonstrate an assumption of male superiority and a disgusting denigration of women. There is also the proscription against cult prostitution (Deuteronomy 23:17-18).

More generally there are the following laws:

‘You shall not lie with a male (Greek: *arsen koitê*) as with a woman; it is an abomination (Hebrew: (*tô‘ebâ*)’ (Leviticus 18:22).

‘If a man lies with a male (Greek: *arsen koitê*) as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them’ (Leviticus 20:13).

The fact that both these laws are so general has led some to assume that they were intended to condemn any and every form of homosexual behaviour. However, this is an assumption. No context is given for these regulations, and there is no discussion of the issues involved. They may have intended to condemn any and every expression of homosexuality. But they may have been directing their condemnation against the kind of public, flagrant, male prostitution that they observed in the Greek world. They may also have been motivated by a concern at the waste of male semen and so of what they understood to be the vehicle of life (they had no concept of the role of the female gamete).

The word ‘abomination’ (*tô‘ebâ*) occurs 116 times in the Hebrew Bible. Mostly it refers to idolatry, but the offering of defective sacrifices is referred to as an abomination (Deuteronomy 17:1); also using false weights (Deuteronomy 25:13-16; see Proverbs 11:1; 20:10). Ezekiel 44:7 includes admitting foreigners into the sanctuary.

Paul on Homosexual Behaviour

Proverbs 16:5 calls arrogance an abomination, and Proverbs 24:9 speaks of scoffing in the same terms. Proverbs 6:16-19 is interesting:

‘There are six things that YHWH hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that hurry to run to evil, a lying witness who testifies falsely.’

What emerges in the discussions of these texts among the Rabbis and in the writings of Jews living in the Greek world is a strong disgust for male prostitution: something that is also condemned by Greek and Roman moralists. The Rabbis go further in condemning the kind of pederasty encouraged in the Gentile world. If this is what the authors of Leviticus were condemning, we should be careful not to use their words to apply to other homosexual actions that may not have been part of their thinking.

Homosexual Behaviour and Saint Paul’s Letters

In the light of this let us re-examine what the New Testament has to say about homosexual acts. In his First Letter to the Corinthians (6:9), Paul writes:

‘male prostitutes (Greek: *malakoi*) and sodomites (Greek: *arsenokoitai*) will not inherit the kingdom of God.’

According to the most obvious reading of the text Paul is repeating what is commonly said by Jewish writers and to a lesser extent also by Stoic and other Greek and Roman moralists of his day. He is speaking against the behaviour of those young men (*malakoi*), quite obvious in cities like Corinth, who dressed themselves up and offered themselves for money for the sexual gratification of other males. He is also condemning those who take advantage of them. The word *arsenokoitai* is not found in the Greek moralists. It seems to have its origin in Jewish circles and to derive from the Leviticus texts quoted above. Since Paul simply lists these sins here we should assume that he is repeating common Jewish condemnation of male prostitution and pederasty. We would need more evidence to justify extending Paul’s meaning to condemn outright all homosexual behaviour.

We come now to another brief statement from Paul (1 Timothy 1:10): Among those who behave in ways that are ‘against sound teaching’ he includes ‘fornicators, sodomites and slave traders’. ‘Fornicators’ translates the Greek ‘*pornoi*’, the primary meaning of which is ‘male prostitutes’. ‘Sodomites’ translates the Greek ‘*arsenokoitai*’, which could be referring to those who pay for the sexual services of the prostitutes. ‘Slave traders’ translates the Greek ‘*andrapodistia*’. Paul may well be referring to those who take slave boys into brothels for purposes of prostitution. Paul’s words to Timothy cannot safely be used to condemn other forms of homosexual behaviour.

In his Letter to the Romans (1:25-27), Paul makes a more elaborate statement:

‘Because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator ... God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.’

This text is notable for two reasons. Firstly, it is one of only a handful of texts from the time that even mention female homosexual behaviour. Secondly, Paul uses the expression ‘unnatural’ (Greek: *para physin*), used by Plato against those who allowed their affection for young men to descend into sexual gratification, and used by a number of Greek moralists in their condemnation of male homosexual gratification that was separated from real affection and where the younger man was treated as a commodity for sale. It is possible that Paul is expressing the traditional Jewish opposition to male prostitution, extending his words to include women to demonstrate the universal degradation from which human beings need redemption. In the light of other Jewish writings, it is likely that he intends to include the Gentile practice of pederasty. Beyond that, we are in the area of conjecture.

Our conclusion is that these three texts from Paul cannot be used to close the discussion about homosexual behaviour as some are wont to do. At the same time we should observe that Paul has more to offer to the discussion on homosexual behaviour than these three statements. Everything he says about love, sensitivity, mutuality, and the sacred nature of sex, is relevant to the discussion, as it is relevant to the discussion about heterosexual behaviour.

Adolescent Sexual Ambiguity

Let us now reflect on words from Jack Dominionian on adolescent sexual ambiguity (*The Growth of Love and Sex*, 1982):

‘Not all young people who experience attraction towards their own sex will necessarily finish as exclusive homosexuals. Everybody knows that adolescents may have crushes on members of their own sex at school or afterwards which are ephemeral and not persistent. Indeed, some experts maintain that no permanent orientation is established until the middle twenties, and so great care should be taken not to affix a label too early. If, on the other hand, the tendency is there clearly in interest, attraction, dreams and unconscious orientation, then denial of the obvious is purposeless. Life has to be lived fully in that style’ (page 68).

Accurate diagnosis and expert counseling are important. Important, too, are acceptance, respect, empathy, clarity, chastity, modesty, and love.

Dysfunctional Homosexual Behaviour

Homosexual behaviour (like heterosexual behaviour) can be pathological: it can involve fear of the opposite sex, fear of adult responsibility, need to defy authority, attempt to cope with hatred of members of one’s sexual group, competitiveness, flight from reality, escape into bodily stimulation, violence, and promiscuity.

Levels of Commitment

As in heterosexual relationships, so in homosexual relationships, there are levels of commitment. There is non-relational sex, which includes de-personal sex, consumer-sex, exploitation, eroticism, and exhibitionism. There is relational sex, but without commitment, in which are found values of warmth, sensitivity, openness, and mutual respect.

Conscience

There is relational sex with commitment, in which people experience true communion. Jack Dominian writes (page 68):

‘What is absolutely clear is that relationship is better than isolation and loneliness, that permanent commitment is better than transient exchanges, and that faithfulness is better than promiscuity.’

This last point is touched on also in the statement from the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales referred to earlier. They write:

‘A specially delicate situation arises when homosexual persons are convinced that, although they accept that homosexual acts in themselves cannot be justified, it is found impossible in practice to lead a celibate life. They might then claim that the choice remains between a stable union, in which there is a necessary and inevitable physical relationship and an obviously distasteful promiscuous way of life. Such persons argue that in their particular case the stability of the union outweighs the disorder of the homosexual acts that take place within it. They would argue that the goodness or badness of an act can only be judged morally in practice when consideration has been given to intention and circumstances’ (page 9).

Father Jan Visser, co-author of the 1975 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: *‘Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics’*, writes:

‘When one is dealing with people who are so predominately homosexual that they will be in serious personal and perhaps social trouble unless they attain a steady partnership within their homosexual lives, one can recommend them to seek such a partnership and one accepts this relationship as the best they can do in their present situation.’

Conscience

We refer back to Chapter 29 on Conscience. Suffice here to quote Pope John-Paul II in his *‘Crossing the Threshold of Hope’* (1994, page 191. He reminds us:

‘If a person is admonished by his own conscience—even an erroneous conscience, but one whose voice appears to him as unquestionable—he must always listen to it. What is not permissible is that he culpably indulge in error without trying to reach the truth.’

Presenting the Teaching of the Church

When it comes to presentation of the Church’s teaching in this complex area, we would all do well to recall the following from the Washington State Catholic Conference, *The Prejudice Against Homosexuals and the Ministry of the Church* (1983, 2b):

‘The Church can combat the evil of prejudice against homosexuals by strongly proclaiming the gross evil of prejudicial attitudes and conduct toward lesbians and gays; by fostering legislation ... to remove systemic prejudice; by making efforts to purify of all prejudice the manner in which it conveys its moral teaching on homosexuality; by encouraging empirical research on homosexuality and the ways to combat prejudice against lesbians and gays; and by fostering ongoing

theological research and criticism, with regard to its own theological tradition on homosexuality, none of which is infallibly taught.'

Conclusion

While we work for greater clarity, we must guard against so over-rating sex that ordinary, healthy, pleasure-loving and sexually attractive people are made to feel inadequate. Let us not forget that genital sex does not fill our existential loneliness. Let us also encourage chastity, service, and love-giving. We must be careful not to be hasty in defining a person as being 'heterosexual' or 'homosexual'. We must avoid defining people solely according to their sexual orientation. We should reject false stereotypes prevalent among the dominant and often unthinking heterosexual majority. We should be careful not to add to anyone's insecurity by oppression, or force others into neurosis by rejection. We are to accept people as they are and help everyone find the next step of love in their lives. What a failure it would be not to recognise the remarkable gift of homosexuality!

