

HOMOSEXUALITY: THE NEW VATICAN STATEMENT

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THE CHURCH'S official stand on homosexuality is now more fully spelled out in a letter "On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons" from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), addressed "to the Bishops of the Catholic Church" under date of October 1, 1986.¹ Since its general publication at the end of that month, this new document (hereafter referred to as Letter) has evoked strongly conflicting responses from those concerned with gay people and the Church's ministry to them.²

As one who shares these concerns, I too have somewhat mixed reactions to this new document. I regard the Letter as constructive in many respects, and disappointingly negative in others. On balance, despite its negative aspects, I think it amounts to a significant step—albeit a small, hesitant step—forward. In what follows I shall elaborate this view by reflecting on the Letter's discussion of (1) homosexual activity, (2) homosexual orientation, and (3) pastoral care.

HOMOSEXUAL ACTIVITY

Naturally the Letter has little chance of winning positive attention from those who would be satisfied with nothing less than a reversal of the Church's traditional condemnation of homosexual activity. But surely any hopes or expectations along this line are vacuous: there is no reason to think that the magisterium is or ever will be able to embrace the radically different understanding of human sexuality—indeed, of the human person—which such a reversal would necessarily entail. The present Letter is in fact largely a response to movements within the Church which have sought to effect precisely these far-reaching changes

¹ Official English version published by Vatican Polyglot Press, 1986.

² Toward the conclusion I shall indicate certain reservations about the connotations of the term "gay." Nonetheless I regularly employ this word alternately and equivalently with "homosexual," so as to avoid monotony as well as the suggestion of an overly clinical attitude which "homosexual" is often taken to convey.

in basic Judeo-Christian anthropology.³

Given the fundamental nature of the issues involved, it is hardly surprising that the Vatican perceives a crisis at hand. This surely helps explain the severe tone of the Letter as a whole, as well as the cautionary attitude on pastoral initiatives. Nonetheless, precisely in its reiterated condemnation of homosexual activity, the Letter is on the whole remarkably restrained.

Moreover, the theological articulation of this condemnation shows significant advance over the previous CDF discussion of the problem, viz., in the "Declaration on Certain Questions concerning Sexual Ethics" (*Persona humana*, Dec. 29, 1975; hereafter cited as *PH*). This applies to both the biblical and extrabiblical components of the argument. Indeed, the relationship between those components is the first noteworthy point of difference between the two documents. Whereas *PH* had based its stand essentially on the natural-law tradition, invoking biblical prooftexts for corroboration, the Letter now moves Scripture to the center of the argument and leaves the natural-law dimension almost entirely implicit.

The Letter's presentation of biblical teaching now clearly shows that the traditional condemnation of homosexual practices is not drawn principally from the few scattered texts which expressly refer to those practices. "The Church's doctrine regarding this issue is . . . based not on isolated phrases for facile theological argument, but on the solid foundation of a constant biblical testimony" (no. 5, par. 2). The "basic plan for understanding this entire discussion of homosexuality is the theology of creation we find in Genesis" (no. 6, par. 1). Specifically, this means that persons, "in the complementarity of the sexes, . . . are called to reflect the inner unity of the Creator" (*ibid.*). The human body thus has an intrinsic "spousal significance"⁴ which is not removed, however much it is obscured, by original sin (*ibid.*).

It is within this general framework that the Letter then proceeds, in the remaining paragraphs of no. 6, to locate the various antihomosexual statements which appear in the Old and New Testaments.⁵ Here it strikes

³ I use the expression "Judeo-Christian" not to amalgamate the Jewish tradition with the Christian, or to deny the significant diversity between the two, but as a shorthand reference to certain general convictions about the human person which are common to the two distinct traditions, and also to acknowledge Christianity's debt to Judaism as regards these basic principles of biblical anthropology.

⁴ The Letter has this phrase in quotation marks without reference. It clearly alludes to the now famous theme developed by John Paul II in his catechetical series on sexuality, beginning with the general audience of Sept. 5, 1979; the spousal-body theme appears for the first time in the audience of Jan. 9, 1980.

⁵ The texts are Gen 19:1-11; Lev 18:22, 20:13; Rom 1:26-27; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10.

me that, in spite of the Letter's own earlier disavowal, the treatment of these texts is still somewhat overly facile. Several Anglican and Reformed theologians, who adhere to the traditional condemnation of homosexual activity on scriptural grounds, nonetheless admit that the literal applicability of particular antihomosexual references (especially the Sodom story, Gen 19) is more highly problematical than CDF seems prepared as yet to recognize.⁶

I refrain here from pursuing this criticism in detail, for the point turns out to be of relatively minor importance. The theologians just mentioned have in fact preceded the Roman magisterium in articulating what John Paul II and CDF now call the God-given "spousal significance" of the human body as the essential scriptural basis for appreciating the moral unacceptability of homosexual behavior. On this basis, as the same theologians point out, one must reject the approach of those progay advocates who try to stake the credibility of the traditional condemnation entirely on the exegetically verifiable meaning of particular biblical texts while ignoring or dismissing the broader context of the Genesis creation teaching.⁷

It is that context, as well as the continuing tradition of the Church ("in unbroken continuity with the Jewish and Christian communities within which the ancient Scriptures were written," no. 5, par. 2), which legitimates our applying to the present question the particular antihomosexual texts found in both Testaments. While I think more reserve in the Letter's handling of those texts would have been appropriate, I do not deny the essential soundness of its procedure in interpreting them coherently with the "spousal significance" doctrine drawn from Genesis and affirmed in the Church's ongoing tradition.

Placing the homosexual issue within this spousal context allows the Letter to improve on earlier magisterial formulations in another important way as well. According to *PH*, homosexual acts necessarily involve objective moral evil inasmuch as they "lack an essential and indispensable finality" (no. 8). The finality here mentioned has heretofore been generally understood to be procreation, and the condemnation accordingly taken to be based on the lack of procreative potential inherent in homosexual acts. Catholic as well as non-Catholic theologians disapproving of homosexual activity have often criticized this approach as excessively preoccupied with procreation, and have sought to restate the antihomosexual teaching in a way that is not so exclusively dependent

⁶ I have reviewed the observations of these theologians concerning the above texts in my doctoral thesis, *American Protestantism and Homosexuality: Recent Neo-Traditional Approaches* (Rome: Pontifical University of St. Thomas, 1981) 62-86.

⁷ *Ibid.* 91-101.

on the procreative aspect of sexuality.⁸

In the present Letter, while potential parenthood is still seen as essentially included in the spousal significance of the body, primary stress is now placed on the relational aspect of this significance. Hence, from the perspective of "the divine plan of the loving and life-giving union of man and woman in the sacrament of marriage," the Letter teaches that the homosexual relationship "is not a complementary union, able to transmit life; and so it thwarts the call to a life of that form of self-giving which the Gospel says is the essence of Christian living" (no. 7, parr. 1, 2). In this emphasis on the factor of sexual complementarity, the relational meaning of sexuality is more adequately recognized. And while the relevance of procreative potential is not ignored, the condemnation of homosexual practices no longer seems to hinge so decisively on the magisterial teaching against contraception.⁹

The Letter now proceeds to conclude its teaching on the objective immorality of homosexual acts by stating that persons engaging in such acts "confirm within themselves a disordered inclination which is essentially self-indulgent" (no. 7, par. 2). Contextually this cannot be taken to mean that gay people are personally self-indulgent, nor does it suggest that their sexual behavior is always prompted by consciously self-indulgent motives such as sensual lust, exploitation, and the like. The immediately preceding clause has expressly granted that gay persons are "often generous and giving of themselves"—at least implicitly, it would seem, allowing that those are apt to be the very qualities that such persons sincerely intend to express in and through their sexual relations. What I take to be the Letter's point is that homosexual acts, however noble their conscious inspiration might sometimes be, are inauthentic expressions of sexual love insofar as they lack the sexual complementarity and potential fruitfulness demanded by the nuptial truth of created persons embodied as male and female. In this context "self-indulgent" would refer essentially to the preference of one's homosexual proclivity over God's creative design, and not necessarily to the more basely selfish motive of satisfying one's physical passion.

It may be that I am here stretching the Letter's words so as to give them an acceptable sense—though I hope not. I admit to being uncom-

⁸ A recent Catholic effort is Edward A. Malloy, *Homosexuality and the Christian Way of Life* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981) 224–27. For non-Catholic approaches see Williams, *American Protestantism* 53–60.

⁹ Whether the Letter's approach amounts to a tacit correction of *PH*, or only a clarification, remains an open question. Bartholomew Kiely, "La cura pastorale delle persone omosessuali: Nota psicologica," *Osservatore romano*, Nov. 14, 1986, p. 6 (no. 6), endorses the primarily relational understanding of the "finality" missing from homosexual activity, but does not expressly attribute this idea to the literal intention of *PH*.

fortable with the sudden appearance of "self-indulgent" in the conclusion of this section without explanation, and without any clear and explicit basis in the earlier discussion. Also troubling, though perhaps only a problem of syntax, is the application of this harsh characterization directly to the homosexual "inclination" rather than the activity. But the Letter's entire treatment of the homosexual inclination or orientation poses distinct problems of its own, and to these we now turn.

HOMOSEXUAL ORIENTATION

Probably the one statement of the Letter that has proved most newsworthy, and most disturbing, is the assertion that the homosexual orientation itself is "an objective disorder" (no. 3, par. 2). That assertion has been especially highlighted in both Catholic and secular press coverage, often with the suggestion that it represents a new and regressive development in Vatican thinking.¹⁰ Sr. Jeannine Gramick, for one, has evidently interpreted it in this way; she is quoted as literally "shocked" at this teaching, which she regards as "doing psychological violence to gay people."¹¹ John Harvey, supporting the Letter, has felt obliged to deny that its reference to objective disorder is "demeaning."¹²

A fair reading of the Letter in its entirety should provide ample reassurance that the demeaning of gay persons is quite contrary to its basic intention. The precious worth of these persons is affirmed often and in various ways: they are described as "often generous and giving of themselves" (no. 7, par. 2), as having a "transcendent nature" and "supernatural vocation" (no. 8, par. 2), as invested with an "intrinsic dignity . . . [which] must always be respected in word, in action, and in law" (no. 10, par. 1), as possessing "the fundamental liberty which characterizes the human person and gives him his dignity" (no. 11, par. 2), and as having a special claim on the Church's pastoral care (nos. 13-17).

It might be objected, however, that the positive thrust of these lofty affirmations is effectively (even if unwittingly) nullified by stigmatizing the homosexual orientation as "an objective disorder." And it must be admitted, at the very least, that the Letter nowhere explains how its adverse reflection on the homosexual orientation of gay persons squares with its multiple affirmations of their dignity. The elements needed for such an explanation are actually present in the Letter, but they are not

¹⁰ In the *New York Times* (Oct. 31, 1986), the account of this teaching was subheaded "Inclination Now Condemned." *Catholic New York* (Nov. 6) adopted "Objective Disorder" as the headline of its entire story.

¹¹ Liz Schevtchuk, "Vatican Document on Homosexuality Draws Criticism" (NC news release), reprinted in *Bondings* (New Ways Ministry) 9, no. 1 (fall 1986) 2.

¹² *Ibid.*

connected in a way that shows the coherence of its stance on "the homosexual condition" and "homosexual persons." In order to establish this coherence, we must first contextualize the Letter's evaluation of the homosexual condition as objectively disordered.

The homosexual condition is the subject of the Letter's first major discussion, occurring immediately after two introductory articles. Reference is first made to *PH* no. 8, where approving notice was taken of "the distinction commonly drawn between the homosexual condition or tendency and individual homosexual actions" (no. 3, par. 1). The actions were morally condemned as "intrinsically disordered," though with the acknowledgment that prudence must determine the extent or absence of culpability in particular cases. The condition as such was not condemned, but seen as a phenomenon requiring greater understanding.

From this point of departure the new Letter goes further into the homosexual condition in a passage which includes the troublesome phrase "objective disorder." To be able to determine the precise import of that phrase, we need to see the passage in full (no. 3, parr. 2, 3):

In the discussion which followed the publication of the Declaration [*PH*], however, an overly benign interpretation was given to the homosexual condition itself, some going so far as to call it neutral, or even good. 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.

Therefore special concern and pastoral attention should be directed toward those who have this condition, lest they be led to believe that the living out of this orientation in homosexual activity is a morally acceptable option. It is not.

The evident aim of this passage is to dispel what is perceived as a dangerous misunderstanding of the Church's attitude toward the homosexual condition. According to the standard rule of theological interpretation, the meaning of the particular assertion about "objective disorder" should be construed strictly with reference to the misunderstanding at which the entire passage is targeted.¹³ This means that we must first identify the misunderstanding and appreciate why the magisterium has viewed it as being so dangerous.

The Letter itself indicates that the misunderstanding consisted in an "overly benign" view of the homosexual condition as "neutral or even good." It is certainly the case that in recent years the Church's acceptance

¹³ Cf. John C. Ford and Gerald Kelly, *Contemporary Moral Theology 1: Questions in Fundamental Moral Theology* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1958) 31: "For example, if the pope is settling a controversy, his words should be taken in conjunction with the controversy; if he is condemning an error, the words should be interpreted with reference to the error and so forth."

of the distinction between orientation and behavior was widely taken to mean that "there is nothing wrong with being a homosexual as long as you do not act on it." The traditional teaching was thus rendered by Daniel Maguire, who labeled it the "be-but-don't-do" position.¹⁴ Fairness compels me to add that I have known some people working in gay ministry who attempted in all sincerity to uphold this; they professed to accept the homosexual orientation as a value-neutral given, or even to appreciate it as a divinely bestowed good, while rejecting its genital expression as divinely forbidden.

The reason why this cannot work is expressed in the scholastic axiom "action follows being" (*agere sequitur esse*). If it really is good—or even simply "all right"—for someone to "be" homosexual, there can be no plausible basis for a rule which tells such a person "don't do." Unqualified affirmation of homosexual "be"-ing must entail the readiness in principle to affirm the "do"-ing. Progay theological advocates have done exactly that; and evidently their logic was not lost on the magisterium. The "overly benign interpretation" of the orientation/behavior distinction ("be-but-don't-do") was seen as dangerous precisely because its manifest incoherence paved the way for rejecting the moral prohibition of homosexual behavior itself. Thus, in the Letter, the essential point of insisting that the homosexual condition involves "an objective disorder" is to safeguard the prohibition of homosexual activity by excluding a notion ("it's OK to be gay") which would render that prohibition nonsensical.

Does the Letter's teaching about "objective disorder" constitute a retreat from a more benign view previously taken of the homosexual orientation? Hardly; in fact, *PH* itself (no. 8, par. 2) had already spoken of the homosexual "tendency" as arising either "from a false education, from a lack of normal sexual development, from habit, from bad example, or from other similar causes," or else from "some kind of innate instinct or a pathological condition judged to be incurable." Hence, while the homosexual condition was seen as not immoral in itself (even though, as the above enumeration clearly suggests, said condition might often result from causes which bespeak sin), its evaluation was certainly less than benign.¹⁵

Additional insights into this evaluation emerge from the observations of several knowledgeable authors who are generally recognized as sym-

¹⁴ Daniel Maguire, "The Morality of Homosexual Marriage," in *A Challenge to Love: Gay and Lesbian Catholics in the Church*, ed. Robert Nugent (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 120.

¹⁵ Thus Richard Woods, in *Another Kind of Love: Homosexuality and Spirituality* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Image Books, 1978), protested that *PH*'s negative discussion of the homosexual condition had "overlooked the largest class of all: the healthy homosexual population" (90).

pathetically attuned to gay concerns. Marc Oraison, for one, had written as follows only months before *PH* was published:

Is the fact of being homosexual *bad*? The term is highly ambiguous; it suggests both a judgment of moral value, and a judgment of well-being which is purely descriptive. That homosexuality is bad in the second sense is *obvious* [emphasis added]. Of course some homosexuals don't experience their situation as a life problem, a malaise, a source of suffering, yet I wonder more and more if this attitude is not their only defense against overwhelming anxiety. I have also become more and more convinced that most people who live with homosexuality feel very differently. In terms of full sexual development, the problem of homosexuality really is bad, like a psychological birth defect (though not like a defect in the congenital sense that must limit human potential). People experience the problem in different ways; they may adjust to it rather well, or struggle with it unsuccessfully. But the fact of being homosexual is in no way *morally* bad.

At the same time there are issues to consider. The fact that a person is homosexual—which is not a moral question—is going to pose problems of behavior which do call for moral appraisal.¹⁶

In a similar vein, Robert Nugent has more lately pointed out the basis for resistance by pastors and church members generally to the public self-affirmation (“coming out”) of gay celibate clergy and religious:

... Many people are opposed to public disclosures of homosexuality among celibates simply because they disvalue not only homosexual behavior on moral grounds, but ... also the orientation on psychological, social, and other grounds. ... Nor do they believe that a homosexual orientation can fulfill the real meaning of human sexuality in the same way that heterosexuality does. Heterosexuality remains “normative,” and, as Bishop Mugavero has stated, “any other orientation respects less adequately the full spectrum of human relationships.” And so if a person believes that a homosexual orientation is “morally neutral,” but still deficient in other ways (lack of procreative possibilities, lack of complementarity, violation of the fundamental sexual differences and symbolism, etc.), he or she will not want to give the impression that a homosexual orientation is as acceptable as a *sexual identity*, [even] apart from actual behavior, as a heterosexual orientation. ...¹⁷

An even more recent statement of the Washington State Catholic Conference explains that the Church, while it “does not morally condemn homosexual orientation,” nonetheless sees it as “not fully appropriate

¹⁶ Marc Oraison, *The Homosexual Question* (London: Search, 1977) 115; emphasis original except where noted in the quotation.

¹⁷ Robert Nugent, “Priest, Celibate and Gay: You Are Not Alone,” in *A Challenge to Love* 264; emphasis original. This passage as a whole clearly does not purport to express Nugent's own viewpoint, but rather his (very accurate) understanding of the standard Catholic view. The quotation from Bishop Francis Mugavero of Brooklyn is taken from the bishop's pastoral letter *Sexuality—God's Gift*, Feb. 11, 1976.

since in the person so oriented there is lacking an integration of the psychic side with the procreative possibilities of the physical side." The statement also indicates that homosexual persons would be morally obliged to try to change their condition were it not for the fact that there presently appears to be "no known way of altering a definite homosexual orientation."¹⁸

These samplings sufficiently refute the notion that the Church had previously regarded the homosexual orientation with a benign attitude which it has now reversed. There was no such benign attitude in the earlier teaching; the present Letter intends to correct any false impression to the contrary.

In doing so, with its statement about "objective disorder," the Letter in fact articulates the Church's view with more restraint than the sources quoted above. Their observations about the homosexual orientation as manifesting pathology, psychological deficiency or incompleteness, lack of integration, etc., are surely consonant with the general drift of the Letter, and they might well even be inferable from the Letter's creation theology which I have treated earlier; but the Letter never expressly states these or similar negatives in connection with the homosexual condition, and they should not be taken as included within the designation of the condition as "an objective disorder." That designation refers strictly, as stated in the text, to "the particular inclination" which consists in "a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil," i.e. toward the morally forbidden category of sexual practices.

This restrictive working definition of "the homosexual condition" should be understood in terms of the Letter's introductory disavowal of any pretense at "an exhaustive treatment" of the "complex" homosexual question, confining its scope to "the distinctive context of the Catholic moral perspective" (no. 2, par. 1). Surely the homosexual orientation of any given person comprises a much broader range of aspects (affectivity, emotional responses, etc.) which have at most an indirect bearing on the proclivity toward genital acts. It is evidently in this sense that *PH* (no. 1, par. 1) spoke of the human person as "so profoundly affected by sexuality that it must be considered as one of the factors which give to each individual's life the principal traits that distinguish it." But this wider sense goes beyond the point of the Letter's present concern, which is to repel a challenge to the Church's moral teaching against same-sex genital activity. The "objective disorder" designation, therefore, does not

¹⁸ Washington State Catholic Conference (WSSC), *The Prejudice against Homosexuals and the Ministry of the Church*, Seattle, Apr. 28, 1983. Text in *Homosexuality and the Magisterium: Documents from the Vatican and the U.S. Bishops, 1975-1985*, ed. John Gallagher (Mt. Rainier, Md.: New Ways Ministry, 1986) 46-54, at 47 and 48 respectively.

refer globally to the homosexual orientation in all its broader dimensions, but only to its bearing on genital behavior.¹⁹

The analysis I have proposed goes a long way toward resolving the apparent conflict between the Letter's emphatic affirmation of the personal dignity of gay people and its insistence that their homosexual condition involves an objective disorder. If the two terms "homosexual condition" and "objective disorder" are understood in the narrow sense which I maintain is warranted by their context, it becomes easily evident that the connection which the Letter draws between the two is not equivalent to an assertion that the personalities of gay people are sick, distorted, or depraved. One's "particular inclination" toward any "intrinsic moral evil"—wrathfulness, unchastity, cowardice, or whatever—is not to be equated with his or her total personality. To acknowledge the homosexual condition in this sense as disordered is no more an attack on the personality than to make the same acknowledgment, for example, regarding an irascible temperament. Thus it is possible and even necessary to affirm one's overall character—including, possibly, many basic traits pertaining to one's homosexual orientation taken in its broadest sense—notwithstanding the recognition of disorder in any particular inclination toward any category of sin, sexual or other.

Not until it has almost reached its close does the Letter refer to the key principle at work here, namely, that one's personality is not to be simply reduced to his or her sexual orientation (no. 16). The teaching against this reductionism here is incisive, but its brevity and its position in the document are apt to convey the impression that it is held to be of only subsidiary importance. This surely was not CDF's intention. Yet by treating this matter earlier and in greater depth, it might have deflected some of the misunderstanding and consequent resentment which have arisen over its "objective disorder" teaching in reference to the homosexual orientation.

It may be that CDF is not fully aware of the extent to which the reductionist mindset impedes homosexual persons from even understanding the Church's teaching accurately. To the extent that gay people equate their personal identity with their homosexual condition ("the particular inclination" etc.), they tend to misperceive any negative appraisal of that condition as a profoundly threatening attack against their very essence. The correction of this misperception is a *sine qua non* for

¹⁹ As noted above, *PH* had attributed the homosexual "tendency" to a variety of pathological and/or sinful causes. The present Letter serves to clarify *PH* by more explicitly indicating that those observations refer precisely to the homosexual person's "particular inclination . . . toward an intrinsic moral evil" and not indiscriminately to all aspects of that person's sexuality in the broader sense acknowledged in *PH* no. 1.

the effectiveness of any church teaching or pastoral ministry here. It is a corrective task which must be undertaken with great delicacy and compassion, however, since the misguided and defensive attitudes of gay people are largely a reaction to unjust personal rejection which they experience all too frequently. I shall return to this in greater detail toward the conclusion of the section on pastoral care.

PASTORAL CARE

The foregoing discussions, notwithstanding their largely theoretical nature, are profoundly relevant to "the pastoral care of homosexual persons" which is the stated subject of the Letter. "Only what is true can ultimately be pastoral," whereas "departure from the Church's teaching, or silence about it, in an effort to provide pastoral care is neither caring nor pastoral" (no. 15, par. 2). Hence it must be a basic pastoral concern of the Holy See and of local bishops everywhere "to assure that the teaching of the Lord and his Church on this important question be communicated fully to all the faithful" (no. 17, par. 1).

This is a guiding principle of fundamental importance, and it carries a correspondingly serious obligation of adherence. Hence it is all the more regrettably ironical that the Letter has so overstated the principle as to undercut its appeal, if not its credibility. To begin with, the enunciation of binding moral teaching seems to consume a disproportionately large amount of space in relation to the more practical aspects of that "pastoral care" which is supposed to be the Letter's main concern. Even where pastoral matters are addressed more directly, the imperative of adhering to church teaching is reiterated with obsessive frequency; in one section comprising less than 1,200 words (nos. 13-17), it crops up as many as eleven times. Moreover, the attitude taken toward dissent—including the warning to ban dissenting groups from church facilities (no. 17, par. 8)—strikes me as overly harsh, even though I myself subscribe to the Church's teaching and am theologically opposed to dissenting positions espoused by various gay organizations and their supporters in the theological community.

Undoubtedly CDF is correct in repudiating pastoral approaches which contradict church teaching, or which misrepresent it, suppress it, or equivocate about it. It is only reasonable to expect that ministers or organizations seeking to function under church auspices should abide by normative church teaching. This does not mean, however, that efforts to stifle all dissent and debate on the homosexual issue are well advised or even just. As mentioned at the end of the preceding section, gay people are very frequently victim to unjust rejection which provokes attitudinal defenses effectively preventing them from even understanding the

Church's teaching properly; hence their nonacceptance of that teaching, although misguided, does not put them in bad faith such as would disqualify them from authentic dialogue. For pastors to refuse this dialogue is therefore a further unjust rejection.²⁰ It is also likely to harm the Church at large by depriving it of an important self-educational opportunity; for when challenges to received positions are confronted in open discussion, the Church stands to learn from those challenges even in the process of refuting them.²¹

All of this is not to canonize the gay movement globally via the presumption of good faith based on invincible error. Anyone sufficiently acquainted with the gay movement recognizes the presence within it of deceptive, manipulative, and exploitative tendencies, including the tactic of stampeding upright Christians into condoning homosexual practice by playing on their sense of guilt over real antigay injustices in the Church and society. The CDF Letter has noted these tendencies well (see especially nos. 9, 10, 14); but that is the only side of the matter which it purports to see. In reality, the gay movement is exceedingly complex; it contains some elements that are insidious, some that are simply misguided, and still others aiming at goals that are quite sound, e.g. overcoming injustice, promoting self-esteem and wholesome friendship.

A globally hostile assessment of the gay movement is therefore quite as invalid as a globally benign one; and the former is arguably more apt to generate insensitivity toward injustice and even acute misery suffered by homosexuals—as witness the Letter's inflammatory allusion to AIDS,²² its one-sidedly negative approach to the question of civil-rights

²⁰ Benedict Ashley, addressing the assembled U.S. and Canadian hierarchies at a workshop on sexuality (Dallas, 1981), struck the proper balance: "... the magisterium ought to continue to preach from the housetops. . . , patiently educating the Christian people in the biblical truth that true sexual fulfillment is to be found only in faithful and fruitful marriage. . . . At the same time the magisterium must not reject nor neglect those persons whose subjective conscience does not permit them as yet to see the practical truth of the Church's teachings on these difficult matters" (Workshop proceedings published under title *Human Sexuality and Personhood* [St. Louis: Pope John Center, 1981] 239).

²¹ Cf. Richard Lovelace, *Homosexuality and the Church: Crisis, Conflict, Compassion* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1978): the homosexual challenge "touches the nerve of many crucial spiritual and theological questions," and so "reformation and renewal of many aspects of the church's life and thought can develop around the consultations concerning this issue" (9–11); this is "a problem which God has set before the church, the solution of which must involve a thorough-going tune-up of theology, spirituality, ministry, and mission" (13).

²² "Even when the practice of homosexuality may seriously threaten the lives and well-being of a large number of people, its advocates remain undeterred and refuse to consider the magnitude of the risks involved. The Church can never be so callous" (no. 9, par. 2, 3).

legislation,²³ and its sinister insinuation (all too familiar from other contexts) that gay people by their provocative excesses are themselves largely blameworthy for the violent and insane hatred directed against them.²⁴

In an editorial entitled "Stern Pastors," the *Times* of London ventures that the Letter's title is a misnomer, that its preoccupations "have more to do with the public political dog-fight over sexual morality in the West than with the real pastoral needs of homosexuals."²⁵ Unfortunately, there is at least an appearance of plausibility in that assessment, given the Letter's indiscriminate and strident antagonism toward the gay movement, its truculence toward dissent, its nagging repetition of the call for conformity to church teaching. One might be excusably tempted to go even further and suspect that the really predominant concern in this CDF intervention is to uphold the authority of the magisterium. Based on my observations in the two previous sections, as well as additional considerations immediately below, I do not accept these assessments as essentially valid. The point of my lament is that the Letter, by laying itself open to such reactions, seriously weakens the impact of its substantive moral teaching and of those progressive pastoral elements which it does contain.

The progressive elements must now be noted. The Letter forthrightly denounces "violent malice in speech or in action" directed against gay persons and acknowledges that such malice is not simply an item of history but a continuing disgrace in the present, one which "deserves condemnation from the Church's pastors wherever it occurs" (no. 10, par. 1). Gay people, moreover, share in the "intrinsic dignity of each person [which] must always be respected" not only "in word, [and] in action" but also "in law" (*ibid.*). The pastoral mission of the Church is seen to require a multidimensional effort which involves, besides sacramental ministry and individual counseling, the promotion of fellowship

²³ "There is an effort in some countries to manipulate the Church by gaining the often well-intentioned support of her pastors with a view to changing civil statutes and laws" (no. 9, par. 2). The Church is "aware that the view that homosexual activity is equivalent to, or as acceptable as, the sexual expression of conjugal love has a direct impact on society's understanding of the nature and rights of the family and puts them in jeopardy" (no. 9, par. 3). "In assessing proposed legislation, the bishops should keep as their uppermost concern the responsibility to defend and promote the family" (no. 17, par. 9). See also the following note.

²⁴ "When such a claim is made [i.e., that the homosexual condition is not disordered] and when homosexual activity is consequently condoned, or when civil legislation is introduced to protect behavior to which no one has any conceivable right, neither the Church nor society at large should be surprised when other distorted notions and practices gain ground, and irrational and violent reactions increase" (no. 10, par. 2).

²⁵ *Times* (London), Dec. 6, 1986, lead editorial.

through a call to “the entire Christian community . . . to assist its brothers and sisters” in overcoming isolation (no. 15, par. 3). The Letter also encourages the specific inclusion of the homosexual question in catechetical programs on human sexuality (no. 17, par. 6). Special concern is shown for the families of homosexual persons (*ibid.*, par. 7).

Although these affirmative items are usually intermingled with (and often even appear subordinated to) the more negative points discussed above,²⁶ they should not on that account be dismissed as tokenism. The fact that such affirmations appear at all, for the first time ever in a document of the Roman magisterium (and a CDF document at that), in itself marks a significant advance over former times when “official teaching” was even more narrowly confined to the function of reprimanding deviations from orthodoxy while only tacitly or implicitly, if at all, acknowledging other pastoral needs.

The present Letter’s affirmations are typically stated in brief and general form, not to render them platitudinous but to allow for diverse specifications according to concrete local exigencies. Let us recall that the direct addressees of this Letter are the bishops of the world-wide Church. It is they, in their individual dioceses and/or regional conferences, who are expressly charged with the responsibility for implementing the various suggested initiatives according to the needs and opportunities present in their respective jurisdictions (nos. 13, 15, 17).

The same is true as regards the negative points in the Letter, which are likewise stated as general admonitions and not as apodictic directives about particular policy decisions (e.g., regarding a given proposal of civil legislation, a given group of gay Catholics); here, too, it is the responsibility of local bishops to determine their concrete application in prudent fashion (no. 14). Even the Letter’s insistence that no pastoral approach may condone homosexual conduct leaves intact the need already recognized in several bishops’ pastoral guidelines to apply standard prudential principles—as regards erroneous or perplexed consciences, gradualism, etc.—in dealing with concrete cases.²⁷ Overall, in line with the venerable

²⁶ E.g., the condemnation of violence against homosexual persons is immediately followed by an admonition against trying to overcome this crime by endorsing homosexual practice, and then by the suggestion that such endorsement is a somewhat understandable provocation for the antigay violence; the affirmation that homosexual persons share with other people certain basic rights which warrant legal protection is balanced out by the negative references to gay-rights legislation; the various pastoral initiatives (education, fellowship, etc.) are invariably qualified by the constant reminder to adhere to church teaching, the condemnations of all dissent and ambiguity, warning about occasions of sin, etc.

²⁷ Catholic Bishops of England and Wales, *An Introduction to the Pastoral Care of Homosexual People*, 1979 (U.S. edition: Mt. Rainier, Md.: New Ways, 1981) 9 (final two paragraphs) and 13 (pastoral guideline no. 14); San Francisco Senate of Priests, *Ministry*

canonical maxim *favorabilia extendenda, odiosa restringenda*, we must hope that bishops will exercise their pastoral prudence in the matter of homosexual ministry by making the utmost of the Letter's positive suggestions while applying its negative strictures as narrowly as possible.

Catholic pastors might well heed the many leaders in other Christian denominations who, while unambiguously upholding the traditional attitude toward homosexual orientation and practice, have increasingly recognized that authentic ministry in this area requires the Church and the gay community to accept a mutual relationship in which each is able to challenge the other and willing to hear the challenge addressed by the other.²⁸

The Church must indeed challenge homosexual persons, and in an even more profound way than the CDF Letter has mainly in mind. The Letter stresses the need to challenge active homosexuals to take responsibility for their growth toward chastity with divine help, instead of demeaning them by an overly facile assumption that their sexual behavior is always compulsive (no. 11, par. 2). This caution is appropriate—allowing, as the Letter does, that in some cases the behavior is in fact likely to be at least quasi-compulsive—but a still deeper challenge is ultimately needed. Homosexuals must learn to overcome their inner defenses which distort both their own self-concept and their understanding of the Church's teaching.

In light of the Church's biblically based sexual outlook, homosexual persons should be led to re-examine not only their sexual life-style but even their sexual self-understanding as "gay." I am increasingly persuaded of the correctness of the view of Australian scholar Dennis Altman, who affirms himself as gay, that to label oneself in this way "is to adopt [i.e., opt for] a certain identity whose starting point is a physical

and Homosexuality in the Archdiocese of San Francisco, May 1983 (full text in *Homosexuality and the Magisterium* 55–78) 62–64 ("The Principle of Gradualism"), 64–66 ("The Role of Conscience"). WSCC statement (see n. 18 above) in *Homosexuality and the Magisterium* 49. Kiely in *Osservatore romano* (n. 9 above), at no. 7, specifically endorses gradualism in applying the Letter's teaching to the pastoral care of homosexuals. This perspective, in connection with standard principles concerning conscience as articulated in the episcopal sources here cited, seems also to corroborate the cautiously lenient recommendations of my essay "Gay Catholics and Eucharistic Communion: Theological Parameters," in *A Challenge to Love* 205–15.

²⁸ Richard Lovelace (see n. 21 above) is the most forceful exponent of this theme in the Reformed tradition. Significant Anglican contributions include Bishop Bennett J. Sims (Atlanta), *Sex and Homosexuality: A Pastoral Statement* (1977); David Atkinson, *Homosexuals in the Christian Fellowship* (Oxford: Latimer House, 1979; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981).

and emotional attraction to one's own sex."²⁹ Altman continues:

... Thus gayness is a particular social form of homosexuality, while homosexuality is best understood as a universal component of human sexuality, and one that manifests itself in a number of ways other than gayness. Despite the trend among some sections of the gay movement and some sociobiologists to restate the argument for a genetic predisposition to homosexuality, the evidence for a polymorphous and undifferentiated sexuality—repressed and sublimated along various lines due to both individual psychological experience and social pressures—seems to me more persuasive . . . because of my own experience. I have known no one intimately, of either sex, who has not been aware at some point in his or her life of a potential attraction to both sexes.³⁰

Hence, although one's predominantly or exclusively homosexual orientation at any particular time is more often likely to be simply a present given for which he or she is not essentially responsible, the person must be held responsible for the options which he or she makes in regard to that given. These options certainly include decisions about sexual behavior, as the Letter insists; but also included, at a deeper and often unrecognized level, is the option concerning the assignation of homosexual orientation as a central component of one's self-definition (identity).

As I have explained in the second section, CDF does briefly refer to this issue (no. 16) but does not seem to have fully appreciated its crucial importance. Otherwise it would have been able, in reply to its own question "What, then, are homosexual persons to do who seek to follow the Lord?", to offer a more satisfactory answer than simply "carry the cross . . . in service to the will of God Himself who makes life come from death and empowers those who trust in Him to practice virtue [= 'a chaste life,' par. 5] in place of vice" (no. 12, parr. 1, 3). Again, this is undeniably true as far as it goes, but a more complete answer would have invoked the distinction between present sexual orientation and basic personal identity so as to explicate that "a chaste life" need not always mean permanent celibacy; it could also refer to eventual heterosexual reorientation and marriage.³¹

Certainly I would not advocate raising premature hopes here, and I respect the cautions of professionals on the matter; but based on some of the clinical evidence along with the implications of Altman's comment above, and also a growing number of personal experiences that come to

²⁹ Dennis Altman, *The Homosexualization of America, the Americanization of the Homosexual* (New York: St. Martin's, 1982) 70.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 70-71.

³¹ In this respect, ironically, the Letter does regress from *PH*. The earlier document had at least noted that sometimes the homosexual tendency "is transitory or at least not incurable" (no. 8, par. 2).

my awareness, I am willing to suggest that the prospects for heterosexual readjustment are often apt to be better than we have widely assumed. Many non-Catholic leaders have long recognized this.³² In any case, much is likely to depend on what a given person believes, or can come to believe, about his or her potentialities in this regard. A major reason for discouraging the adoption of a "gay" identity is that it is self-limiting, tending to reinforce the notion of oneself as permanently fixed in an exclusive homosexual orientation; this notion then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It bears repeating here that great compassion and prudence are needed in posing this challenge to the notion of a gay identity, since this identity is typically adopted as a defense mechanism. To challenge the gay identity is not to attack the person (even though the person will usually think so), but it is definitely to attack his or her defenses. This cannot be prudently or morally done without undertaking to eliminate or overcome threatening conditions which seem to necessitate the defensive posture. Specifically, this means the assurance of acceptance and affirmation in place of the rejection and condemnation which, internalized as self-rejection and self-condemnation, furnish a constant provocation for the defensive reaction of "I'm gay and OK."

Here is where we confront the other side of the two-way relationship between the Church and the gay community, namely, the need for the Church to hear and accept the challenge of facing its own failure to be really a loving and caring community for homosexual persons. Non-Catholic ministry inspired by traditional moral teaching has been far ahead of official Catholic leadership in condemning Christian connivance in the cultivation of that irrational fear and hatred of gay people which is nowadays frequently called homophobia.³³ The Church cannot be persuasive in urging severe moral demands upon homosexual people

³² Ruth T. Barnhouse, in *Homosexuality: A Symbolic Confusion* (New York: Seabury, 1977), claims that "thirty percent of male homosexuals who come to psychotherapy for any reason (not just for help with their sexual preference) can be converted to the heterosexual adaptation"; apparently "not as much is systematically known about female homosexuality as about the condition in men" (95; emphasis original). The author adds that the statistic just given is "well known and not difficult to verify," and suggests that homosexuals denying that their orientation is reversible are resisting an awareness that would threaten their complacent acceptance of a gay identity (109). See also Williams, *American Protestantism* 139-43, 212-14.

³³ Lovelace (*Homosexuality and the Church* 12) suggests that, as one of the "most important" fruits of facing up to the homosexual challenge, the Church "will discover that its own unconscious fear and hatred of gay persons has led it to join our society's unchristian rejection of homosexuals and therefore to neglect mission and ministry to the gay community." For other comparable quotations from several authors, see Williams, *American Protestantism* 8-14.

concerning chastity, or in discouraging their participation in permissive gay associations, as long as it does not make wholesome friendship available to them within its own community and neglects or refuses to assist their harmonious integration into the wider society (with all that this may entail regarding legal protection of their basic rights). The CDF Letter's various positive initiatives surely convey an incipient recognition of these needs. A more profound sense of their importance, and of the Church's inadequate responsiveness to them up to the present, might well have tempered the severity of many of the Letter's more negative elements.

"It should be apparent by this time that the proposal for dual repentance—that gay Christians renounce the active life-style, and straight Christians renounce homophobia—is asking a great deal from both sides."³⁴ This statement of Richard Lovelace, growing out of the problem in his Presbyterian community, summarizes the Catholic situation equally well. The same holds for his further observation that the Church itself, no less than homosexual persons, needs to rely on the assistance of divine grace to meet the challenge facing it.

Along the same line, I would add even further that compassion, patience, and prudence—and all that these entail in terms of gradualism—are equally indispensable for both the Church and for gay persons in gauging their expectations of themselves and of each other. The attitudinal distortions making for homophobia are likely to be no less formidable than those which underlie the gay-identity concept. Just as pastors are obliged to support gay persons in their slow and often faltering progress toward the still-unachieved goal of chastity (whether married or celibate), so gay people in their turn must learn to appreciate genuine advances in the Church's attitude toward them, even though these advances may be evidently hesitant and often seemingly overshadowed by evidence of persisting insensitivity.

Mutual forbearance should be less difficult if, with due regard for the unique complexity of the homosexual issue, we learn to view this as an instance of a broader human problem. In many other areas as well—the overcoming of anti-Semitism, for instance—we are tempted to frustration upon discovering that the old attitudes continue to manifest themselves despite undeniable good will and concrete evidence of progress, so that even church statements intended as constructive come across as being (and to some extent really are in fact, albeit unwittingly) contemptuous

³⁴ Lovelace, *Homosexuality and the Church* 129.

or condescending.³⁶ This is not to equate interfaith issues with the present subject, but only to point out that they each, in very different ways, pose formidable challenges to deeply ingrained attitudes which must be confronted with a combination of resolute determination and realistic patience. I would argue that both these qualities are even more needed in regard to the homosexual challenge, since the Church's confrontation with it is so much more belated.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to show that the new Letter from the Vatican is an important contribution in several respects: it bases the Church's moral teaching on a more adequate scriptural and theological foundation; it clarifies the Church's attitude toward the homosexual condition, eliminating a recent misinterpretation which posed the danger of undermining its moral teaching; it underlines the necessary connection between sound moral teaching and pastoral practice (notwithstanding that the excessive underlining threatens to obscure the content); it poses important challenges to homosexuals (although the articulation of these is overly severe in many instances, and insufficiently penetrating in others); and it marks a beginning (albeit modest) in the Church's acceptance of the challenge to recognize and meet its responsibilities to homosexual persons.

My reservations about the Letter, summarized within parentheses in the preceding paragraph, have been set forth in pointed detail especially in the section on pastoral care. I hope to have explained equally well my conviction that, despite all reservations, the Letter is a progressive document which can be used to much good effect, provided that its immediate addressees (local bishops everywhere) and all others concerned—the homosexual believers among us, their families, those specifically committed to the work of ministering to them, and the wider church community—rise to the challenges and the opportunities it presents.

³⁶ Hence the largely unenthusiastic Jewish response to the Vatican's *Notes on the Correct Way To Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church* (Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, June 24, 1985). Similar reactions had been voiced in 1965 concerning the Vatican II statement in *Nostra aetate* no. 4; see Walter Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: America Press, 1966) 668–69. In 20 years' retrospect, however, the significance of the Vatican II breakthrough can be better appreciated; see the celebratory articles in *Face to Face* (Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, New York) 12 (fall 1985) 2–49.