

THE VATICAN STATEMENT ON HOMOSEXUALITY

In the March 1987 issue of *Theological Studies*,¹ Bruce Williams, O.P., of the Pontifical University of St. Thomas, Rome, published a very thorough and critical evaluation of the Letter "On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons" from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) under date of October 1, 1986. Williams admits to having "mixed reactions to this new document"² but concludes generally that the Letter "amounts to a significant step . . . forward"³ regarding the Church's official stand on homosexuality.

Although Williams makes numerous positive evaluations of the Letter (summarized in his "Conclusion"⁴), two major significant steps are underlined. First, Williams evaluates the theological articulation of the question of homosexuality in the Letter as a "significant advance"⁵ over CDF's previous discussion of this question in the "Declaration on Certain Questions concerning Sexual Ethics" (*Persona humana*, Dec. 29, 1975). Specifically, he concludes that *Persona humana* (*PH*) "based its stand essentially on natural-law tradition," whereas the present Letter "moves Scripture to the center of the argument and leaves the natural-law dimension almost entirely implicit."⁶

Second, although Williams admits that some of the references in this Letter might be "most disturbing,"⁷ the entirety of the Letter provides "ample reassurance that the demeaning of gay persons is quite contrary to its basic intention."⁸ Williams here underlines the Letter's affirmation of homosexual persons 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).⁹

The purpose of this article is not so much to enter into debate with Williams as rather to enter into a dialogue with these two "significant

¹ "Homosexuality: The New Vatican Statement," *TS* 48 (1987) 259-77.

² *Ibid* 259.

³ *Ibid*.

⁴ *Ibid* 277.

⁵ *Ibid* 260.

⁶ *Ibid*.

⁷ *Ibid*. 263.

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ *Ibid*.

steps" in order to advance further the magisterium's teaching on the question of homosexuality and homosexual activity. This article will thus discuss Williams' evaluation of the scriptural exegesis used in the Letter, as well as the Letter's argument that the homosexual orientation itself is "an objective disorder" (no. 3, par. 2).

SCRIPTURAL EXEGESIS

As stated above, Williams rightly argues that the Letter "moves Scripture to the center of the argument"¹⁰ regarding homosexuality. He argues that the biblical data in this Letter demonstrates that the Church's condemnation of homosexual activity is based not simply on limited scattered texts but "on the solid foundation of a constant biblical testimony" (no. 5, par. 2). He points out that the Letter's use of Scripture in this area is based largely on the vision of creation as found in the book of Genesis (see no. 6, par. 1) and affirms the basic "complementarity of the sexes" and the intrinsic "spousal significance" (no. 6, par. 1) of the human body. He thus concludes that "primary stress is now placed on the relational aspect of this significance"¹¹ rather than on the traditional natural-law argument regarding the procreative aspect of sexuality. He quotes the Letter specifically: 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).

The main point here is to stress that heterosexuality remains normative and any other orientation necessarily falls short of the full spectrum of human relationship. This conclusion rests on the Genesis vision of God's sexual design concerning the complementarity of male and female and the responsibility for the transmission of human life.

While Williams treats this basic vision of Genesis correctly, he does not seem to evaluate well specific Old and New Testament references to homosexual activity. He refers, for example, to various "antihomosexual statements"¹² in the Old and New Testaments. On two other occasions he makes reference to particular "antihomosexual" references and texts found in both Testaments.¹³

This point regarding "antihomosexual references" must be carefully evaluated in order to further the Church's understanding of both homosexuality and the morality of homosexual activity. It is of utmost importance to stress the fact that the *concepts* of "homosexual" and "homo-

¹⁰ Ibid. 260.

¹¹ Ibid. 262.

¹² Ibid. 260.

¹³ Ibid. 261.

sexuality” were unknown during the time of the Bible’s composition.¹⁴ The concepts of “homosexual” and “homosexuality” presume an understanding of human sexuality that was possible only with the insights and discoveries of contemporary psychological and sociological analysis.

In *The New Testament and Homosexuality*,¹⁵ Robin Scroggs convincingly argues that the modern concept of homosexuality was unknown to the biblical writers and that the particular aspect of homosexuality condemned as sordid and dehumanizing in the New Testament was likely pederasty. In fact, Scroggs argues, if there is any evidence at all of same-age homosexuality in the New Testament, it is between youths (*meirakia*).

In addition, Richard B. Hays argues in “Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell’s Exegesis of Romans I”¹⁶ that in the New Testament St. Paul sustained no concept whatsoever of a person being “constitutionally homosexual.” Hays argues that for Paul homosexual activity was understood to be a tragic distortion of the created order and thus it is incorrect to conclude that Paul “means” to condemn homosexual activity because such acts were being done by persons who were “constitutionally heterosexual.” In other words, Paul would not have had a notion of someone being “constitutionally homosexual” as opposed to others being “constitutionally heterosexual.”

It is important to conclude, then, that Scripture does not recognize or speak about homosexuality as a sexual orientation *as distinct from* specific genital activity. Biblical writers took it for granted that all people were created with a natural attraction to members of the opposite sex and that their genital activity would and should reflect this fact. As Hays demonstrates, Paul understands all human depravity to *follow from* human unrighteousness: i.e., in this regard, to deny God’s created order. In light of the Genesis vision, then, any homosexual behavior was likely to be judged as the capricious and malicious rejection of God’s designs for humanity.

Williams’ references to “particular antihomosexual references” can thus be misleading, since it is vitally important to stress that biblical statements about homosexuality are statements about certain kinds of homosexual *acts*. In all probability, the biblical writers in each instance were speaking of homosexual acts undertaken by persons whom the authors presumed to be heterosexually constituted. Each biblical refer-

¹⁴ For an excellent treatment of this subject, see Vincent J. Genovesi, S.J., *In Pursuit of Love* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1987) 244–99. I will summarize here a great deal of Genovesi’s analysis.

¹⁵ Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983.

¹⁶ *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 14 (1986) 184–215.

ence to homosexual activity, then, must be interpreted against this presumption.

The famous text of Gen 19 is important in this regard. It should not be overlooked that the Scriptures make numerous references to evils associated with Sodom. Jer 23:14, e.g., indicates that Sodom's sins were adultery, persistent lying, and an unwillingness to repent. Ezek 16:49-50 enlarges these evils to include pride, gluttony, arrogance, complacency, and an unwillingness to help the poor and needy. The Wisdom of Solomon (19:13-14) specifies Sodom's evils as folly, insolence, and inhospitality. Other scriptural references to Sodom include Qoh 16:8, Mt 10:14-15, Lk 10:10-12, 2 Pet 2:4-10, and Jude 6-7.

What is clear from a reading of the entirety of these texts is that the people of Sodom were involved in numerous offenses, homogenital activity being one of those offenses. The Genesis text itself makes clear that the men of Sodom were contemplating homosexual gang rape induced by sexual lust. Gen 19 illustrates well a biblical text where careful exegesis is called for, and further demonstrates that this text alone cannot be used as a justification for prohibiting *all* forms of homogenital activity.

Lev 18:22 is another important Old Testament reference. Appearing in the midst of the holiness code, the text clearly commands the Israelites not to "behave as they do in Egypt where you once lived" or "as they do in Canaan where I am taking you" (Lev 18:3). This concern for cultic purity suggests that homosexual activity was condemned in this text in an attempt to demonstrate the need to avoid practices that might be identified with the occurrences of male and female prostitution common in mid-East religious cults. This prohibition can also be seen in Deut 23:18 and 1 Kgs 14:24, 15:12, 22:47. What seems probable in the entirety of these texts is that homosexual activity is prohibited because of its intimate association with idolatry.

As already stated, St. Paul's treatment of homosexual activity in 1 Cor 6:9-10 and 1 Tim 1:9-10 more than likely is aimed at prohibiting a certain form of pederasty that was widespread in the Greco-Roman culture of his time. Paul is thus not necessarily condemning *all* homogenital behavior as such but the specific practice of pederasty as it appeared in Greco-Roman society.

Paul's basic thesis and theology regarding homosexual activity is clearly detailed in Rom 1:18-32. Paul explains that the pagans have refused to honor the true God and this rejection has resulted in dire consequences, e.g. all sorts of "depravity" (Rom 1:29-31).

The point of looking specifically at these texts is to underline the caution that must be raised in such statements as "particular anti-homosexual texts/references" which Williams employs in his article. There is no question that texts in both the Old and New Testament condemn

various forms of homogenital activity, but each of these texts must be studied in its own context. In addition, the notion of "sexual orientation" is an anachronism when applied to biblical texts.

THE HOMOSEXUAL CONDITION: AN OBJECTIVE DISORDER

A second main point in Williams' treatment of the Letter is his interpretation of the homosexual condition as being objectively disordered.¹⁷ He carefully analyzes this concept in conjunction with the Letter's correlative statement that persons who engage in such activity "confirm within themselves a disordered inclination which is essentially self-indulgent" (no. 7, par. 2). He explains that the intent of this designation must be interpreted over against the vision of Genesis already explained regarding sexual complementarity and the potential fruitfulness demanded by the nuptial union embodied in the male and the female.¹⁸

While Williams takes extraordinary steps to interpret this "disorder" in the best light possible, stressing the fact that the Letter also articulates the dignity of homosexual persons and their "often generous" personalities, he unfortunately gives the impression that homosexual individuals *choose*, in some way or other, this sexual orientation. In explaining the context of "self-indulgent," e.g., he writes of "the preference of one's homosexual proclivity over God's creative design. . . ."¹⁹ Toward the end of his article, he offers interesting reasons why the use of a "gay" identity can be quite self-limiting.²⁰ The problem, however, is that he clearly implies that a person's homosexual orientation is an identity that in some way or other has been chosen. He writes, e.g., that the gay identity is one that "is typically adopted as a defense mechanism."²¹

This assumption regarding "choice" or "preference" leads Williams to conclude that "readjustment" to a heterosexual orientation is possible, even though not "widely assumed."²² He seems to affirm the quotation from the Washington State Catholic Conference (WSCC) that homosexual persons would be obliged to try to change their orientation if this were at all possible.²³ The statement of the WSCC does indicate that presently there seems to be no apparent way of "altering" a homosexual orientation; but the assumption is that such an alteration might be

¹⁷ Letter, no. 3, par. 3.

¹⁸ Williams, "Homosexuality" 262.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.* 275.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Washington State Catholic Conference, *The Prejudice against Homosexuals and the Ministry of the Church*, Seattle, April 28, 1983.

discovered, thus giving the impression that somehow one “chooses” a sexual identity or orientation.

He furthers this assumption regarding “choice” by indicating that for a homosexual person a “chaste life” might “refer to eventual heterosexual reorientation and marriage.”²⁴

It is very important, for obvious pastoral reasons, to recall that *Persona humana* teaches that some homosexuals are “innately” constituted as such and thus their “constitution” should not be thought of as “curable” (no. 8, par. 2).

It is vitally important here to advert to the fact that generally the literature on this subject, as well as the testimony of large numbers of homosexual persons, indicates that the homosexual condition itself is *not chosen*.²⁵ The homosexual orientation appears to be a given, and an individual gradually discovers that he or she sustains this orientation. To the extent that this is true, the condition of homosexuality itself should not be referred to as evil, as the Letter does not do; but neither should the impression be given that one could choose an *orientation* that is heterosexual, even though it might be possible for a homosexual person to *act* heterosexually. In this regard the following “definition” is applicable. A homosexual person sustains

a predominant, persistent, and exclusive psychosexual attraction toward members of the same sex. A homosexual person is one who feels sexual desire for and a sexual responsiveness to persons of the same sex and who seeks or would like to seek actual sexual fulfillment of this desire by sexual acts with a person of the same sex. A distinction is drawn by a majority of authors on the subject between the homosexual *condition* and the homosexual *act*.²⁶

Williams also employs the scholastic axiom “action follows being” (*agere sequitur esse*) to demonstrate that it is not possible to indicate that it is simply “all right” for someone to “be” homosexual.²⁷ If one

²⁴ Williams, “Homosexuality” 274.

²⁵ Masters and Johnson claimed in earlier research that they were able to assist sexually dysfunctionally homosexual persons to become heterosexual. Much of their therapeutic treatment was later disregarded by competent researchers. See William Masters and Virginia Johnson, *Homosexuality in Perspective* (New York: Little and Brown, 1979), and William Masters, “The Masters and Johnson Treatment Program for Dissatisfied Homosexual Men,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 141 (1984) 173–81. In this regard it is important to consult Alan P. Bell and Martin S. Weinberg, *Homosexualities: A Study of Diversity among Men and Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978).

²⁶ George A. Kanoti and Anthony R. Kosnik, “Homosexuality: Ethical Aspects,” *Encyclopedia of Bioethics* 2 (New York: Free Press, 1978) 671. See also Judd Marmon, ed., *Sexual Inversion* (New York: Basic Books, 1965) 4, and James B. Nelson, *Embodiment* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979) 201.

²⁷ Williams, “Homosexuality” 265.

came to this conclusion, he argues, “. . . there can be no plausible basis for a rule which tells such a person ‘don’t do.’ ”²⁸

It is significant here to recall St. Thomas’ teaching on homosexual activity (*in coitu masculorum*):

Now with regard to pleasures of either of these two kinds, there are some which are unnatural, absolutely speaking, but may be called natural from a particular point of view (*sed connaturales secundum quid*). For it sometimes happens that one of the principles which is natural to the species as a whole has broken down in one of its individual members; the result can be that something which runs counter to the nature of the species as a rule, happens to be in harmony with nature for a particular individual (*fieri per accidens naturale huic individuo*), as it becomes natural for a vessel of water which has been heated to give out heat. Thus something which is “against human nature,” either as regards reason or as regards physical preservation, may happen to be in harmony with the natural needs of *this* man because in him nature is ailing. He may be ailing physically: either from some particular complaint, as fever-patients find sweet things bitter, and vice versa; or from some dispositional disorder, as some find pleasure in eating earth or coals. He may be ailing psychologically, as some men by habituation come to take pleasure in cannibalism, or in copulation with beasts or with their own sex (*in coitu bestiarum aut masculorum*), or in things not in accord with human nature.²⁹

The point here is that, for Thomas, homosexual activity, because of some “tragic distortion,” as St. Paul would write, has become “connatural” for some individuals (*connaturales secundum quid*). Certainly, in the biblical as well as the classical, Thomistic traditions heterosexuality is normative. It may happen, however, that some individuals are acting homogenitally. Although clearly the concept of a “homosexual orientation” would be unknown to biblical and classical writers, it seems logical to conclude that these writers would name the homosexual *activity* of these individuals as “distorted,” but would not name the persons themselves as such.

It is crucial, therefore, to give further study to the relationship between “be-ing” and “do-ing.” Williams seems to think that the Letter’s reference to the homosexual condition as objectively disordered rests upon the necessity of insisting that homosexuality *per se* is evil.

What conclusions might be reached? (1) The homosexual orientation and its accompanying life-styles can take many forms which occur cross-culturally, though perhaps not universally. (2) Most people *discover* their sexual orientation as a given, if an ambiguous and confusing given, rather than choose it. (3) Homosexuality is a variation in human sexual orien-

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ *Sum. theol.* 1-2, 31-39.

tation that occurs consistently, even though with less frequency than heterosexuality.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to demonstrate that Williams appreciates two major significant steps in the recent Letter of CDF: Scripture plays a central role in argumentation regarding homosexuality, and homosexual persons are affirmed for their intrinsic and fundamental dignity and human liberty. In dealing with both of these points, he has raised certain notions that need more nuanced sophistication and a greater amount of research.

While the Genesis vision of God's sexual design concerns the complementarity of the sexes and responsibility for the transmission of human life, biblical texts dealing with homosexual activity cannot be fully appreciated simply by analyzing them over against this norm. Each text must be considered in its own specificity and context, with the realization that biblical writers had no understanding of the modern concept of "homosexual" and "homosexuality." While both the Letter and Williams' treatment of the Letter underline strong positive affirmations of homosexual persons, numerous complications enter into this affirmation when one attempts to understand the Letter's statement that the homosexual condition itself is an objective disorder. In this regard it is essential to remember that a large amount of bibliography on this question, as well as the personal testimonies of homosexual people, testify that one's sexual orientation is a given rather than a condition which one prefers or chooses. The Letter itself does not claim to be "an exhaustive treatment" of the "complex" homosexual question (no. 2, par. 1) and thus implicitly urges further consideration and reflection regarding this extremely complicated question. In Thomistic language, e.g., if a person is *per accidens* homosexual in orientation, what must we morally conclude about this individual's condition itself? That is, if the orientation has become "connatural" for this individual, is it authentically understandable to refer to *this person's* orientation as disordered? The words of *Persona humana* are thus relevant: not every homosexual person is "personally responsible" for this condition.³⁰

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³⁰ PH, no. 8, par. 4.