

HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE COUNSEL OF THE CROSS

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[The papal magisterium counsels gay Catholics to join their sufferings to the Cross of Christ. This counsel raises questions concerning its assumptions about the complex reality of homosexuality, suffering as a dimension of human sexuality, and the meaning of the Cross. The implied theological anthropology may lead to the conclusion that a "crucifixion" of the homosexual inclination is required. While sexuality entails suffering, a theology of the Cross is needed that will also signal the possibility of Christian joy and hope realized in the form of self-giving love.]

HOMOSEXUALITY is a contorted matter for Roman Catholic teaching, theology, and pastoral practice. Over the years, articles in *Theological Studies* have reflected Catholic concern with this topic from the standpoints of moral, pastoral, and systematic theology.¹ Here I examine one aspect of official Vatican teaching about homosexuality that touches on all these theological domains, as well as Christian spirituality. The problem I address is the following: In church teaching the homosexual "condition" is posed as a problem so grave that it must be met by a theology of the Cross in the form of a renunciation of sex and a crucifixion of desires for same-

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¹ See John F. Harvey, "Homosexuality as a Pastoral Problem," *Theological Studies* 16 (1955) 86–108; Bruce Williams, "Homosexuality: The New Vatican Statement," *TS* 48 (1987) 259–77; Gerald D. Coleman, "The Vatican Statement on Homosexuality," *TS* 48 (1987) 727–34; Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Catholic Sexual Ethics and the Dignity of the Person: A Double Message," *TS* 50 (1989) 120–50, at 143–44; William E. May, Gerald D. Coleman, "Harvey's *The Truth about Homosexuality*," *TS* 58 (1997) 718–22; Jack A. Bonsor, "Homosexual Orientation and Anthropology: Reflections on the Category 'Objective Disorder,'" *TS* 59 (1998) 60–83; James F. Keenan, "The Open Debate: Moral Theology and the Lives of Gay and Lesbian Persons," *TS* 64 (2003) 127–50. There have also been several book reviews on this topic.

sex love. I ask here how this theological construction stands, not only as pastoral counsel, but as a position involving fundamental and systematic theology. What does it presume about homosexuality in relation to human nature that would call for such a counsel of the Cross? And toward what theology of the Cross do these presumptions lead? For this teaching, however pastoral in its aim, involves us in matters of theological anthropology and ultimately of soteriology, grace, and divine providence. My article cannot discuss all of these theological implications, but examines their underpinnings by focusing on the theological linkage made in church teaching between the sufferings of gay persons and the counsel of the Cross. In my conclusion I propose a counsel of the Cross that might lead to hope for all Catholics and not only for gays.²

I wish to suggest here that if one wants to find a route to the Cross that leads to hope and joy, i.e., human flourishing, one must do so from a reconsideration of the suffering attendant upon human sexuality, whether it be labeled “gay” or not. Whatever its mode of lived existence, sexuality

² The term “gay” denotes the self-acceptance and self-designation by a person of same-gender orientation. As John Boswell and others have demonstrated, the term “homosexual” was an innovation, the establishment of a category, to describe persons not so much by their behavior as by their condition (Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980] 41–59). The thesis was earlier developed by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990) 42–44. Prior to the introduction of that term, there was no fixed terminology to describe the phenomenon of same-sex attraction, and certainly little evidence of people identifying themselves in terms of sexual attraction, much less of any pathology. The term “sodomite” had objective, descriptive connotations, but not pathological ones. Unlike Boswell, Mark D. Jordan denies that a period of social tolerance once prevailed in the West. The “sodomite” indeed bore an identity, as moral offender, a person, and this was an essence bestowed on him by the instruments of religion and especially in the theology of Peter Damian that shifted the focus from acts to persons, thus establishing a sodomitic “essence.” See Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1997) 44. I avoid the term “experience” (as in “the gay experience”) because this term is notoriously difficult to map and its meanings are so multiple. See George Schner, “The Appeal to Experience,” *TS* 53 (1992) 40–59, for his characterization of the “rhetorical appeal” to experience and its limitations. Nor do I wish to suggest that there is a single “gay Catholic” experience that could somehow be generalized to all people who are both gay and Catholic. Such a claim is highly dubious and suggests special pleading. One of the problems involved in discussing this area of human sexuality is that we often assume we know what we are talking about, that “homosexuality” is a clear and distinct idea, or a substantive. For difficulties in conceptualizing the term from a neo-Freudian perspective, see Nancy J. Chodorow, *Femininities, Masculinities, Sexualities: Freud and Beyond* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1994) 34–69. For a poststructuralist analysis, see Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University, 1996) 7–21.

entails some psychic and spiritual suffering in the service of a transcendent love. But this is due to the fact that sexuality entails more than biological function: it is at once biological, psychological, and spiritual—hence defying reduction to theologies based on sexual acts or to the exclusive end of human reproduction. Further pursuit of this line of thought might free us theologically from a biological and metaphysical essentialism sometimes found in discourses about sexuality, even within Catholic theology: a tendency to reduce sexuality to sexual acts, sexual or gender identity, biological gender constructs, or metaphorical and idealist theologies of complementarity built on these premises. What I ultimately seek to lay out is a fundamental Christian anthropology that takes into account the suffering attending human sexuality and leads to an authentic way of participating in the Paschal Mystery of Christ. As part of that ultimate aim, I examine here the Vatican's counsel of the Cross for homosexuals and the presuppositions underlying it with a view toward whether it can offer a word of hope to gay people. But I also seek to lay out a counsel of the Cross that would lead to empathy for and dialogue among persons who bear the name of Christ, regardless of their sexuality.

First, I will look at the counsel of the Cross itself, as it is offered in church teaching on homosexuality. Second, I will examine the current teaching on homosexuality to discern the underlying presuppositions about human sexuality that lead to this formulation of the counsel of the Cross. I will ask whether there is not a dual anthropology unwittingly at work in this teaching, one anthropology pertaining to heterosexuality, the other to homosexuality. Third, using the theories of Paul Ricoeur, I will ask what manner of suffering does attend human sexuality, at least at its deeper symbolic levels. Fourth, in light of the real suffering that can and does attend sexuality, I will ask whether another formulation of the counsel of the Cross, inspired by the work of Karl Rahner, might offer a word of hope and authentic Christian joy, not only to gay Catholics, but to all persons, regardless of their sexual constitution.

THE COUNSEL OF THE CROSS IN CHURCH TEACHING

The congruence in Catholic imagination of homosexuality and suffering in the symbol of the Cross was foreshadowed in the correspondence between Jacques Maritain and the French-American writer Julien Green in the first half of the past century, well before definitive Vatican pronouncements on the matter. Green later described these years, before he finally renounced sex altogether as an impediment to God, as his own “crucifixion” on the cross of sex.³ In what was clearly a painful admission of the fact

³ “Am Kreuz der Sexualität: Ein Leben zwischen Katholizismus and Homosexu-

that he had not been fully honest about himself in a conversation with Maritain, Green, who had been struggling for years with his homosexuality, alludes to his sexual state by admitting to Maritain: "You asked me if I intended to live alone and I said yes when I should have said no."⁴ Maritain, who had many close gay friends, responded with pathos verging on alarm.⁵ But he added: "I have a feeling that there exist for you in this earthly life, perhaps because you have been called more than any other to catch a glimpse of the other side of the tapestry, certain very dark and dangerous problems."⁶ He then offered what he considered the only solution to the conflict between the imprisonments of the flesh and the ends of religion: sexual abstinence for the love of God: "What makes everything so serious is that it is a question of our debt to Uncreated Love. The Gospel nowhere tells us to mutilate our hearts, but it counsels us to make ourselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of God. This is how I think the question must be posed." And, lest there be any doubt about his position, he based his counsel to Green on the ideal of a "white" marriage between a man and a woman, a separation of love from the flesh, lived as a kind of participation in the sacrifice of the Cross of Christ: "I know some married couples who for the love of Christ have made a vow of continence, and whose mutual love has divinely deepened because of it. Why could the same *separation* not be possible in other cases? Or must we put down the Cross of Christ and replace it with the cross of our own choice?"⁷

alität," *Die Tageszeitung*, (Berlin) 19 August 1998; <http://www.taz.de/~taz/980819.taz/ku_T980819.143htm> (accessed August 19, 1998); see also the *New York Times*, 18 August 1998: <<http://www.nytimes.com/yr/mo/day/news/national/obit-green.html>> (accessed August 18, 1998).

⁴ Jacques Maritain to Julien Green, *The Story of Two Souls: The Correspondence of Jacques Maritain and Julien Green*, ed. Henry Bars and Eric Jourdan, trans. Bernard Doering (New York: Fordham University, 1988) Letter No. 28 (June 1927), 64.

⁵ *Ibid.* Letter No. 29 (June 1927), 65: "Let me speak to you frankly: a conversation like the one we had, a letter like the one I received this morning, casts me down before God and makes me ask for death. Because God has led me to understand I *must* help souls like yours to work out the problems in which they find themselves involved." Yet it is worth noting that Maritain expresses his empathy for the suffering that Green endures: "I will never judge you. I do not think you are living in sin. I know nothing about that. What I do know is the depth of your heart, and that you are inclined, as a matter of fact, to push scrupulosity too far, and that at no price would you wish to offend Jesus. And because of this very fact, what causes you pain causes me even deeper pain."

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ The reference is to Maritain's own arrangement with his wife Raïssa. Much later, and before Green's attempted renunciation of sex, Maritain held out the example of Max Jacob, the French Jewish surrealist poet and convert to Catholicism who eventually died of natural causes at Drancy, the Nazi camp outside of

It is remarkable how close Maritain comes to the position that eventually became formally stated in Catholic doctrine, including the full extent of sexual renunciation in fulfillment of the Cross of Christ. For in the face of the reality of gay Catholic existence, the Church in Vatican teaching currently offers a stark spiritual counsel: to join one's sufferings, whatever those may be precisely as a gay person, to the sufferings of Jesus on the Cross and to live a life of sexual renunciation. In proposing the Cross as the appropriate emblem of spiritual aspiration for gay Catholics, this teaching links the state of finding oneself to be gay with grave trial and difficulty and recommends a lived spirituality of the Cross focused on a blending of those sufferings attendant upon this condition with the Passion of Christ. As the first English version of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* stated: "The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. They do not choose their homosexual condition; for most of them it is a trial These persons are called to fulfill God's will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition."⁸

The founding spirit of the Church's counsel of the Cross for gay Catholics is found in the well known "Letter to all Catholic Bishops on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons" (*Homosexualitatis problema* 1986).⁹ Published under the signature of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as

Paris. Maritain wrote: "Max Jacob died a saint. Can we not believe that he showed us the only true solution to the problem [of the flesh and religion] when it takes its most painful forms? Max went to confession every day and to Communion every day. . . . Max found the way, and was, more than anyone else, simply pushed to the extreme. To have recourse to these two sacraments each day, as he did, demands a kind of heroic, but not impossible will; there is no problem stronger than God." See Letter No. 107 (May 22, 1955), 138. On the other hand, Jean Cocteau was to say: "Max dreamed of chastity, and he was always punishing himself because he could never attain it." As reported by Neal Oxenhandler in *Looking for Heroes in Postwar France: Albert Camus, Max Jacob, Simone Weil* (Dartmouth, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1996) 146.

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1994) no. 2358. The text was later changed to read: "The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial."

⁹ *Homosexualitatis problema*, "Letter to All Catholic Bishops on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons," *Origins* 16 (November 13, 1986) 379–82. This document stands in a line of texts on the topic of homosexuality including *Persona humana*, "Declaration Regarding Certain Questions of Sexual Ethics," [CDF 1975] *Origins* 5 (January 22, 1976) 487–94; the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2357–59; "Some Considerations Concerning the Response to Legislative Proposals on the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons," [CDF 1992] *Origins* 22 (August 6, 1992) 173–77; "Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers," [NCCB Bishops'

Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), and with the approval of Pope John Paul II, this document states:

Fundamentally, [homosexuals] are called to enact the will of God in their life by joining whatever sufferings and difficulties they experience in virtue of their condition to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross. That Cross, for the believer, is a fruitful sacrifice since from that death come life and redemption. While any call to carry the cross or to understand a Christian's suffering in this way will predictably be met with bitter ridicule by some, it should be remembered that this is the way to eternal life for all who follow Christ.

In an unusually pointed usage of Scripture, the document then applies the words of Galatians specifically to the situation of gay persons:

It is, in effect, none other than the teaching of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians when he says that the Spirit produces in the lives of the faithful "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control" (5:22) and further (v. 24), "You cannot belong to Christ unless you crucify all self-indulgent passions and desires."

But self-denial is not an end in itself. According to this teaching, it is for the homosexual person the path toward liberation from vice and salvation of one's soul. The document continues:

The Cross is a denial of self, but in service to the will of God himself who makes life come from death and empowers those who trust in him to practice virtue in place of vice. To celebrate the Paschal Mystery, it is necessary to let that Mystery become imprinted in the fabric of daily life. To refuse to sacrifice one's own will in obedience to the will of the Lord is effectively to prevent salvation. Just as the Cross was central to the expression of God's redemptive love for us in Jesus, so the conformity of the self-denial of homosexual men and women with the sacrifice of the Lord will constitute for them a source of self-giving which will save them from a way of life which constantly threatens to destroy them.¹⁰

Committee on Marriage and Family 1997] *Origins* 27 (October 9, 1997) 285–91; and the "Notification" concerning Nugent and Gramick, [CDF 1999] *Origins* 29 (July 29, 1999) 133–36. An analysis of *Persona humana*, *Homosexualitatis problema*, and "Always Our Children" can be found in Mark D. Jordan, *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000) 21–50.

¹⁰ The next sentence reads: "Christians who are homosexual are called, as all of us are, to a chaste life. As they dedicate their lives to understanding the nature of God's personal call to them, they will be able to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance more faithfully and receive the Lord's grace so freely offered there in order to convert their lives more fully to his Way." While penance is mentioned here as providing help to gay persons for attaining a chaste life, no mention is made of the graces accruing from one's baptism or from the life of the Eucharist. Maritain, by contrast, points to Max Jacob's daily reception of the Eucharist as well as the sacrament of penance as helps toward chastity.

As this statement surely assumes, the self-denial of the Cross is a valid spiritual counsel for all Christians. It has been offered to generations of Christians to help them face their various sufferings within the context of their faith. According to this spiritual counsel, identification with the Cross of Christ can lead to service to the will of God rather than enslavement to one's own desires. It can purify one from the desire to have control over all aspects of one's life, and of the evil tendencies that may give rise to sin. For all Christians, the Paschal Mystery is made real partly to the degree that it is personally appropriated. The Gospel frequently reminds us that self-denial is the necessary precondition to discipleship (see Matthew 10:39, Luke 17:33). The Gospel also counsels that it is necessary to bear one's own Cross (Matthew 10:38). Paul's theology is imbued with a sense of the Cross, so that only in the Cross of Christ might one boast (Galatians 6:14). Hebrews sets forth Jesus as an example of one who endured the Cross of life (Hebrews 12:2), and as such stands as a pioneer in faith. And Christian devotional and mystical literature, notably that inspired by *The Imitation of Christ*, recommends the Cross as the pathway to the perfection of the Kingdom.¹¹ This counsel was convincingly put forth by John Paul II in his apostolic letter *Salvifici doloris* where he lays out a phenomenology of suffering and a theology of the Cross where every person "is also called to share in that suffering through which the Redemption was accomplished." For, "[i]n bringing about the Redemption through suffering, Christ has also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption. Thus each person, in suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ" (no. 19).¹²

Granting that this spiritual counsel is native to Christian soil, questions may arise when it is offered to gay people in particular. As it appears in *Homosexualitatis problema*, the counsel of the Cross makes several assumptions about homosexuality. Among these are: that the sufferings of the homosexual attend his or her "condition," a word that suggests that this state is a premoral and creaturely state, not a chosen life orientation; that

¹¹ For the classic passages from *The Imitation of Christ* that speak of the Cross, see Book II, Sections 11–13. See *The Imitation of Christ in Four Books* by Thomas à Kempis, trans. Joseph N. Tylanda (Wilmington, Del.: Glazier, 1984) 97–105. The advice here is universal, directed toward all Christians: "Everything is founded on the cross and everything depends on our dying on the cross. There is no other way to life and interior peace except the holy way of the cross and our daily dying to self" (100). For a critical approach to the authorship and scriptural, theological sources at work in this text, see Kenneth M. Becker, *From the Treasure-House of Scripture: An Analysis of Scriptural Sources in 'De Imitatione Christi'* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000) 15–49.

¹² "The Christian Meaning of Human Suffering," *Origins* 13 (February 23, 1984) 609–24, at 618.

the passions and desires that may emanate from the homosexual condition, to the degree that they are voluntary, and certainly if acted upon, are self-indulgent and should be “crucified”; that homosexuality as a condition tends intrinsically toward evil, i.e., vice and death; that gay people who have not sacrificed their wills in a pursuit of a chaste life, i.e., a life without any sexual expression, are constantly threatened by destruction, presumably their own self-destruction, and eternal loss; and that chastity for the gay Catholic means sexual abstinence, presumably to be distinguished from the evangelical call to celibacy, though perhaps tending toward that ideal. These assumptions, in turn, lead to a rather complex understanding of the Cross in relation to gay Catholic existence, and raise several questions.

First, the sheer fact of being gay, which is said to involve trial and difficulty, is a mode of participation in the sufferings of Christ, a participation that presumably is efficacious in bringing about Christ’s saving work for oneself, thus saving one from perdition. The trials of the homosexual condition find a certain congruence with the Passion of Jesus on the Cross. By joining one’s trials as a gay person to the sufferings of Jesus on the Cross, one will find an identification with Jesus. However, one might ask why this identification with Jesus should issue specifically from the suffering that attends one’s sexual constitution? What precisely are the trials and difficulties in question, and what are their sources? Is there perhaps an overly particular rhetorical association here of the “trials” of gay Catholics with the Passion of Jesus Christ?¹³

Second, through the self-denial of sexual renunciation, one enters into a fruitful self-sacrifice, thus crucifying one’s sexuality, as it were, and overcoming the tendencies that lead to objectively grave evil. The weight of this assumption leads to the conclusion that the effects of homosexuality as a given state tending toward so much evil must be overcome, and can only be overcome through heroic self-denial (the crucifixion of the effects of this condition), and that by implication this is the only road to salvation for the

¹³ It should be noted that self-sacrifice in the form of sexual abstinence, though not necessarily in the name of the Cross, is also recommended to other “classes” of Catholics, notably the divorced and remarried. John Paul II’s apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio* states: “Reconciliation in the sacrament of Penance which would open the way to the Eucharist, can only be granted to those who, repenting of having broken the sign of the Covenant and of fidelity to Christ, are sincerely ready to undertake a way of life that is no longer in contradiction to the indissolubility of marriage. This means, in practice, that when, for serious reasons, such as for example the children’s upbringing, a man and a woman cannot satisfy the obligation to separate, they ‘take on themselves the duty to live in complete continence, that is, by abstinence from the acts proper to married couples’” (no. 84) (“The Apostolic Exhortation on the Family,” *Origins* 11 [December 24, 1981] 437–68, at 465).

gay Catholic.¹⁴ This road is marked by uniting the plight of one's sexual condition to the suffering and sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, thus emulating Christ in his own self-denial precisely through a renunciation of sex. Through this way of imitating Christ, one might overcome the power of evil inherent in one's intrinsically disordered sexual condition and aspire toward a state of "Christian perfection."¹⁵ In view of such a teaching, one is led to ask whether the counsel of the Cross, as presented here, is an expression of faith that could lead a gay person to a life of faith-filled hope, or whether this is merely a theological default position, the only logical conclusion to be derived from the presupposition that the homosexual condition is intrinsically disordered.

Third, one can find in the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross a pattern of self-giving which will in itself save one from the constant threat of self-destruction. The view of the Cross implicit here is that it represents the "fruitful sacrifice" of self which eventually results in a life of self-donation, giving to others. This counsel is certainly apt for all Christians, not only for homosexuals, and is in fact the foundation for an understanding of Christian love in the teaching of Jesus (Matthew 10:39).¹⁶ But can this teaching of Jesus be tied so directly to the "problem" of homosexuality? Does this specificity of application, and its underlying emphasis on avoiding eternal loss, miss something central to the dynamic of love revealed on the Cross itself—a suffering love freely accepted and leading toward life?

To summarize: The official teaching of the Catholic Church on homosexuality offers gay Catholics a spirituality of the Cross that would symbolize a participation in the sufferings of Christ. These sufferings, as a means of cooperation with God's grace, would gradually help to transform the life of the homosexual into a state approximating if not even reaching perfection in the practice of chaste sexual abstinence, a kind of catharsis from the burden of the condition itself. Participation in the Cross would therefore prevent the intrinsic direction of this sexuality from reaching its finality, in the death of sin. Like the unchosen condition of homosexuality

¹⁴ The Catholic "pastoral" discourse has at times not been logically connected to ontology, and one could argue that the counsel of the Cross should therefore not be taken here as a logical inference but as a general pastoral counsel. I am arguing here that the connection between the perception of homosexuality as a problem and the counsel of the Cross is theologically substantive and not only pastoral in its force.

¹⁵ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 2359: "Homosexual persons are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection." This teaching recognizes that "perfection" is not necessarily attained easily or through one single spiritual act or decision.

¹⁶ "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." See Mark 8:34, Luke 9:24; 17:34, and John 12:25.

itself, which for some is the only way they can be, the path of the Cross is the only route through Christian life for the gay Catholic. The Cross of Christ is not a path one chooses out of freedom alone; it is in a sense the only way for one who is beset by the paradox of a sexuality that is at once a part of God's creation yet oriented toward evil. The Cross is therefore set forth as a task, a path of necessary asceticism that leads, through obedience, toward a transcendent form of loving.

How did the Church arrive at such a construal of the Cross for gay Catholics? One can look at only part of the picture here, but it is crucial to do so if one is to be able to offer an alternative approach to the Cross.

THE CONSTRUAL OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN CURRENT TEACHING

In order to understand the problem more clearly, it is helpful to begin by looking at the document that *Homosexualitatis problema* was written to clarify. That document published by the CDF was *Persona humana*, subtitled a "Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics" (1975).¹⁷ That document contained no surprises for a teaching that is based on a normative understanding of natural law. It focuses on sexual acts. Pastoral care for gay persons cannot justify such acts because "according to the objective moral order, homosexual relations are acts which lack an essential and indispensable finality . . . [H]omosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and can in no case be approved of" (VIII). This teaching is further reinforced by what is termed the "judgment of Scripture."

Two further aspects of this teaching are worth noting. First, it distinguishes between different types of gay persons: "transitory" homosexuals and people who are "definitively" homosexual. Both of these understandings are couched in the language of pathology and cure. The transitory homosexual suffers from a tendency which is "at least not incurable." It may be a passing phase of adolescence, for example. The definitive homosexual possesses "some kind of innate instinct or a pathological constitution judged to be incurable" (VIII). However imperfectly framed this distinction may be, it does involve the tacit acknowledgment that homosexuality is not simply a matter of sexual acts, but, as a mode of sexuality, involves other dimensions of human life. The second feature worth noting is the use of the word "anomaly" when the document states: "This judgment of Scripture does not of course permit us to conclude that all those who suffer from the anomaly are personally responsible for it." This is followed by the clause stating that sexual acts between persons of the same sex are disordered and cannot be condoned. The word "anomaly" suggests

¹⁷ *Origins* 5 (January 22, 1976) 487-94, n. 9 Roman numerals in parentheses refer to section numbers in the document.

a departure from the norm of nature, something “suffered,” and hence opens the door to a consideration of homosexual reality from the standpoint not only of sexual acts, but of the underlying nature or constitution of persons. Still, this anomaly is understood as a natural pathology, and so, for the “definitive” homosexual, this anomaly has the status of a congenital defect, something that cannot be cured. Hence, the document states that “culpability [of homosexual persons for their acts] will be judged with prudence” even if no pastoral strategy can condone their sexual acts.

The context for *Persona humana* was a concern on the part of the CDF over sexual hedonism and the corruption of morals (I). In order to settle any ambiguity in the minds of the faithful, it was deemed necessary to present the Catholic Church’s teaching on a number of sexual topics. It is addressed to pastors, and through them, to the faithful. However, the 1986 “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,” *Homosexualitatis problema*, has a narrower audience, namely bishops, and a narrower focus, namely homosexuality itself.¹⁸ The concern that gave rise to this document was that while *Persona humana* properly described homosexual sex acts as “intrinsically disordered,” in subsequent discussion “an overly benign interpretation was given to the homosexual condition itself.” This was immediately followed by an important declaration: “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” (3.2).¹⁹ Moving beyond *Persona humana*, this document casts the “anomaly” or objective disorder of homosexuality not only as a defect, a lack of a good, but as a positive orientation toward evil, a premoral pathology. “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” (3.3).

This document marks a significant step beyond the focus of *Persona humana* on the morality of sexual acts between people of the same sex, or what this document terms “homosexual activity.” While it does not repudiate anything stated in the former document it does focus on the “homosexual condition” or “orientation” in terms of an “inclination.” The term inclination is worth pondering. As has been noted, the document states that

¹⁸ *Origins* 16 (November 13, 1986) 379–82. Of course, the methods of its promulgation assured that the document would reach a wider audience with dispatch. As a result this became not only an advisory document for bishops but in many ways a teaching document of the first order, directed toward gay Catholics themselves.

¹⁹ Numbers in parentheses refer to section and paragraph numbers in the document.

this inclination, presumably at least an attraction toward another person of the same sex, is not a sin. But it is a “tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil” (3.2). There is already here present in the text a subtle but potentially significant distinction, however unintentional it may be, between a “condition” or “orientation” that is neutral in its moral status, a preontic evil at most, such as a withered arm, which is a defect of nature; and an “inclination” or “tendency” that is itself ordered toward a moral evil, i.e., a positively vicious disordered tendency.²⁰ In other words, the document seems to insinuate into this condition a quality (inclination, tendency) that is no longer merely ontic, but in some way intrinsically leads toward what is morally evil. What seems to be indicated here is not only a state of concupiscence as a mere potency, but concupiscence as potency ordered toward both evil and objective sin.²¹

For a clearer understanding of the issue at hand, I turn to Karl Rahner’s important essay on concupiscence, “The Theological Concept of Concupiscentia.”²² Rahner explained that there are three senses of concupiscence at work in Catholic dogmatic theology. The first and broadest, and a form

²⁰ It could well be, of course, that one is looking for a cogency here in the use of terms that is not to be found. For this use of “inclination” becomes even more noteworthy in light of Thomas Aquinas’s use of it in his discourse on the natural law, where inclination is construed as an orientation toward the goods of preserving human life, promotion of it through propagation and education, and desire for knowledge of God in social life. The natural law concerns that toward which human persons are inclined naturally, toward such goods, and not toward some unnatural inclination toward an intrinsic evil. Good has a rational end, whereas evil does not; therefore the human being has a natural inclination to apprehend what is good, and the natural law is ordered according to these natural inclinations toward what is good. See *Summa theologiae* 1–2, q. 94, a. 2: “Quia vero bonum habet rationem finis, malum autem rationem contrarii, inde est quod omnia illa ad quae homo habet naturalem inclinationem, ratio naturaliter apprehendit ut bona, et per consequens ut opere prosequenda, et contraria eorum ut mala et vitanda. Secundum igitur ordinem inclinationum naturalium, est ordo praeceptorum legis naturae.”

²¹ The analogy of the serial killer might serve to illustrate my point, both by similarity and by contrast. The serial killer presumably suffers from an objective psychological disorder and has a tendency, more or less strongly ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil, namely, killing other human beings. The serial killer is presumably also a spiritual subject, one to whom God’s offer of grace is made, however unevenly in the scheme of divine justice. But, presuming that the serial killer has all of his faculties, and even though he suffers from a pathology, his giving in to that tendency results in a clear moral evil. So, too, for the homosexual, with the exception that the homosexual, unlike the serial killer, is fully responsible for the playing out of his inclinations. He is presumably also a spiritual subject, one to whom God’s offer of grace is ever made, however unevenly in the scheme of divine justice. His playing out of those inclinations, even in a faithful commitment to another human being, is objectively a repudiation of God’s grace, a sin.

²² “The Theological Concept of Concupiscentia,” *Theological Investigations*, 1.347–82.

of which Rahner eventually proposed, is concupiscence as a “conative potency and its respective act.” This is a spiritual capacity, rooted in human freedom that might work as equally toward avoiding an evil end as tending toward one. It is proposed not simply as a postlapsarian state of human nature, but also as a prelapsarian state—i.e., given with a “pure” human nature. The second and narrower sense is concupiscence as “sensitive desire” which, as Rahner pointed out, may involve both spiritual and creaturely movements working in relation to each other (as, for example, in the appreciation of beauty). The third and narrowest sense, is sensitive appetite “and its act.” This appetite “strives after its sensitive object in opposition to the law of the moral order independently of the higher, spiritual conative potency, and thus resists the spiritual free decision of man’s will. For this reason this concupiscentia is also called evil, disordered, rebellious concupiscence, evil inclination.”²³ Rahner argues that dogmatic theology has tended to favor the second and third senses of concupiscence, with a decided accent on the third sense. He discusses the “grave difficulties” with this approach and emphasis, and wishes to revive the notion of concupiscence as natural appetite for the good, and to see in it “not just the manifestation of sin, . . . not just what is left over in the justified, something to be overcome eschatologically because it is in contradiction with human nature in this concrete order.”²⁴ But before he arrives at this conclusion, he specifies his difficulties with the narrowing of the term to a sense appetite ordered toward evil.

First, a “dogmatic consideration of concupiscentia ought not immediately to concern itself with the tendency of the sensitive appetite to what is morally forbidden, as the ascetico-moral consideration does—quite rightly.”²⁵ Without jettisoning an appropriate focus on a postlapsarian tendency toward what is forbidden, Rahner wanted to begin by focusing on the character of spontaneity proper to the appetites *qua* appetites, and to leave room for an exercise of freedom on the part of the spiritual subject who fundamentally desires to move toward a state of integrity.

Second, one never moves toward a sensible good by dint of sensitive appetite alone: “Every object (hence a sensible object too) is apprehended by man in a sensitive-spiritual way, and consequently pursued by him in the same way too.” And this applies equally to spiritual objects, which can only be pursued through the mediation of the body and the senses. “Thus it is by no means clear why concupiscentia should be conceived of as a ‘rebellion’ precisely of the ‘lower’ man against the ‘higher.’”²⁶ As in the case of beauty, it might well lead toward a good, and not necessarily only toward a disordered notion of beauty.

²³ Ibid. 350.

²⁵ Ibid. 351.

²⁴ Ibid. 382.

²⁶ Ibid. 353–54.

Third, the joining of the second and third sense of concupiscence results in a view of the “sensitive part” of human nature where “this only impels to evil and has no other function.” This implies “something immediately and exclusively opposed to the moral order as such, i.e., something opposed to the inner teleology of man as a whole.”²⁷ But this results in the introduction of an “inner contradiction into man’s ontological, stratified structure: the ontologically lower stratum of man would have the character merely of something burdensome and hindering, an encumbrance which works purely in opposition to the moral order.”²⁸ The freedom of the human person as a spiritual subject and moral agent would seem to be seriously compromised in this view from the very start. A tendency toward evil governs and even supervenes the natural teleology of the person toward integrity.

What is the teaching of *Homosexualitatis problema*? It would seem that this teaching is based on a narrow theological construal of concupiscence, much as it had been described by Rahner. In speaking of homosexual activity, the document states that homosexuals “confirm within themselves a disordered sexual inclination which is essentially self-indulgent” (7.2). “As in every moral disorder, homosexual activity prevents one’s own fulfilment and happiness by acting contrary to the creative wisdom of God” (7.3). Here “moral disorder” describes “homosexual activity” as the fruit of an inclination that is itself “self-indulgent” and ordered toward an intrinsic evil, however “objective” this disorder (or anomaly) may otherwise be. The adjective “self-indulgent” is thus applied here to the “inclination” itself. The inclination would function here as a sensitive appetite that is ordered against the moral law, casting the gay person in danger of perdition. Hence, self-indulgence is not merely the characterization of an act, but, in its adjectival form, self-indulgent describes the inclination itself. The inclination here entails within itself, a tendency, even if not realized in act, toward what is intrinsically evil, presumably even if it also could lead to the desire to love another person in a committed way of life.

The problem that emerges here is that one finds established by this document, certainly unwittingly, a dual-track theological anthropology. On one track, one recognizes persons who are presumably heterosexual in their sexual inclination; this inclination, ordered toward the complementary union between persons of the opposite sex and, formally, toward the transmission of human life, is a more or less strong tendency toward an intrinsic good. These people suffer the postlapsarian state of a premoral concupiscence, but their sexual ordination is toward a good end, despite that concupiscence, even when construed in its narrowest sense. On the other track, one finds persons who are presumably homosexual in their

²⁷ Ibid. 357.

²⁸ Ibid.

sexual inclination; this inclination, objectively disordered because it runs contrary to the Creator's design, is a more or less strong tendency toward an intrinsic evil. Like heterosexual persons, these people also suffer the postlapsarian state of premoral concupiscence, with the additional proviso that the tendency of their desire is self-indulgent and therefore already leans toward sin. Theirs is not only an objective disorder like a defect of nature, but, because of the vicious character of a "tendency" or "inclination," it is also a disorder that has moral implications, even before one has acted upon the tendency through sexual activity. It is "intrinsically" disordered.

This dual-track theological anthropology raises the further questions of the sovereign justice of God's grace, and the theological implications for a God who would allow for what would seem to be two modalities of human nature. Both of these are classic issues of providence that call for thoroughgoing attention with regard to the Church's teaching on homosexuality. I make only two brief observations in passing.

The first issue is not as serious as it might seem at first blush. No one is denied God's grace, or, as it were, consigned to sin,²⁹ even if their given constitution is objectively disordered and tends intrinsically toward moral evil. A strong doctrine, established by Thomas Aquinas, holds that God's grace, in God's justice and providence, can be manifested unevenly. While the final goal of grace as a free gift cannot be thought of in terms of greater or lesser, for that goal is union with God, sanctifying grace (*gratia gratum faciens*) can be thought of as "more" or "less" present in particular persons. This "diversity" of grace is attributable in part to the preparation for receiving it. While that preparation varies from person to person, it is more fundamentally attributable to God in God's very self, who disposes of grace in diverse modes and thus works toward the beauty (*pulchritudo*) and perfection of the Church. This simply reflects the diversity of creation itself, converging toward a perfection of all things in God.³⁰ The point here is that God's grace is given to each person precisely *qua* person, and not as a member of a species or class of actors. This would hold true of persons of any sexual constitution.

However, it would seem insupportable to hold that God causes or even permits a specific condition of nature that would itself be intrinsically ordered toward evil. Yet the doctrine under examination raises the classic

²⁹ See Second Council of Orange (529), DS 1922; see J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, 7th rev. ed. (New York: Alba House, 2001) 804.

³⁰ *Summa theologiae* 1-2, q. 112, a. 4: "Unde prima causa huius diversitatis accipienda est ex parte ipsius Dei, qui diversimode suae gratiae dona dispensat, ad hoc quod ex diversis gradibus pulchritudo et perfectio Ecclesiae consurgat: sicut etiam diversos gradus rerum instituit ut essent universum perfectet."

question of why the providence of God would allow³¹ for such apparent anomalies as a homosexual inclination that is intrinsically ordered toward evil. And this naturally raises the question of what kind of God is here assumed, a question that can only be raised and not pursued at this juncture.

Of course, this is a problem only if one perceives homosexuality to be not only an anomaly of nature, an objective pathology of nature, but also a premoral condition intrinsically slanted toward evil. But if one refrains from characterizing the homosexual condition as a pathology of nature, the tendencies emanating from that condition are no longer seen as pathological, in either an “objective” natural sense, or in a premoral or moral sense, any more than are the tendencies that emanate from the heterosexual condition. The pivotal question then becomes what it is that sexual tendencies tend toward, their finality in terms of human flourishing (integrity) and salvation. This moves us into the terrain of moral theology, and, prior to that, into a discussion of what is meant by “nature” and how that category can be used constructively in a theological anthropology, topics that cannot be pursued here.³²

But these are precisely the issues that lie at the heart of the theological ambiguity of *Homosexualitatis problema*, which moves from the “problem” of homosexual acts, taken by themselves, to the “condition” that gives rise to them in homosexually constituted persons. In both documents, however, explicitly in *Persona humana* and implicitly in *Homosexualitatis problema*, the condition in question derives from an “innate instinct” that is itself a “pathological constitution judged to be incurable” (V), one that tends

³¹ For a distinction between the notion of God’s “permitting” evil as a part of the freedom of creation, and the notion that God has “allowed” it, but prescinding from a final explanation, see Karl Rahner, “Why Does God Allow Us to Suffer?” *Theological Investigations* 19.194–208. He argues that suffering is incomprehensible, that no explanation, even that of the classic divine permission, suffices. The incomprehensibility of suffering is part of the mystery of the incomprehensibility of God, which does not have to be justified (see *ibid.* 205–7).

³² For a reevaluation of the category “nature” in the interest of constructing a revised version of natural law that takes account of scientific research on the incidence of homosexuality, see Stephen J. Pope, “Scientific and Natural Law Analyses of Homosexuality: A Methodological Study,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25 (Spring 1997) 89–126. “The central issue, then, is not genetic or statistical naturalness but rather whether homosexuals can respond (at least, that is, as well as heterosexuals) to the universal human challenge to train and habituate their sexual passions—naturally oriented to various goods but existentially disordered by concupiscence—in a way that contributes to their flourishing” (115). For a revised formulation of natural law taking into account the cultural and social constructions of human life, see Cristina L. H. Traina, *Feminist Ethics and Natural Law: The End of the Anathemas* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1999).

toward what is incontrovertibly evil.³³ As has been noted, *Homosexualitatis problema* moves beyond *Persona humana* in focusing not merely on acts, but on the “condition” itself, a condition that is not only an objective disorder because it runs contrary to the natural law, but also that is by nature self-indulgent and ordered toward moral evil. It is in the context of this view of homosexuality that the counsel of the Cross is offered to gay persons. For homosexuality is construed as a condition so fraught with intrinsic moral difficulty that it can only be met by the Cross of sexual renunciation. When conjoined to the suffering of Christ, the gay person’s sacrifice enables one to live through the difficulties of the condition, and presumably, united with the suffering Christ, ultimately to be freed from what can only be seen as a moral problem—not only as defect of nature, but as a part of creation so defective as to be caught up in the mystery of evil.

This counsel of the Cross, while plausibly offered as a word of comfort and as a form of ecclesial support to gay Catholics, problematizes homosexuality in such a way that the Cross becomes a symbol of existential imprisonment in a condition not of one’s choosing. While this could not be the intended effect of the counsel of the Cross in *Homosexualitatis problema*, it commends a form of “Christian perfection” which presumes a state of celibacy, but does not explain how this can be achieved by someone who does not freely choose it, who does not know a vocation to it. The teaching would consign homosexual persons to a kind of an ongoing “crucifixion” of the flesh, perhaps such as that which Julien Green at one time attempted. Most seriously, it may well truncate the meaning of the Cross itself, which is not by any means exhausted by the sufferings of Jesus, but rather coincides with the manifestation of his glory, as the place where God’s tender love and mercy meet the suffering of the human condition in and through a suffering love.

This is not an appeal to reject a theology of the Cross for gay Catholics. Suffering indeed persists as a part of human existence, including sexuality, and therefore begs of a theological response that will contribute to a deeper understanding of the Christian vocation to participate in the life of Christ. But to recommend the Cross of self-sacrificial suffering to gays as seemingly the only spiritual path open to them, indeed as a requirement for salvation, is to risk missing part of the central mystery of the Cross, including the fact that Christ freely accepted it. Is there another way of

³³ This approach seems to sidestep the Thomistic distinctions that apply to *habitus*, inclination, and act, which would place this teaching less in ontology and more in ethics. Part of the problem with trying to analyze this teaching rests in this kind of category confusion, where ontology either implies ethics, or becomes ethics, i.e., a theology of morals.

talking about the Cross that can speak not only to gay Catholics, but to all Catholics, as a word of hope and even of joy? I will explore this question further. But first one must ask what manner of suffering is envisaged here.

FORMS OF SEXUAL SUFFERING

Maritain's description of what Green knew in his sexual existence, "the other side of the tapestry," brilliantly evokes the fact that in the lives of many gay people, suffering is a reality. Indeed, *Homosexualitatis problema* is not incorrect when it says that trials and difficulties attend the lives of many homosexual persons. For example, there is no question that throughout the world homosexual persons continue to encounter prejudice, even against their persons and not only with respect to the sexual acts they might or might not engage in. The fate of Matthew Shepherd, the victim of a homophobic murder in Wyoming, looms as a symbol in its own right of where this kind of prejudice can lead. And there are many subtler forms of suffering that attend being gay, including the psychic suffering and loneliness that attends the inability of various familial, social, cultural, and religious structures to accept the existence of desires that some people have "by nature" to love a person of the same gender. And, for gay Catholics especially, there is notably the paradox of finding oneself to be both Catholic and gay, and trying to make sense of and live with and within a teaching that holds that one's given sexual constitution is intrinsically ordered toward evil. The possible implications of this for a theological anthropology have already been noted.

But beyond these obvious levels of suffering there are assumptions about sexuality itself that may contribute to this characterization of homosexuality as an occasion for suffering. The first form of suffering comes from the construal of sexuality itself, at its most deeply symbolic levels. The second comes from the finite nature of human sexuality as a conduit of human loving, and ultimately of love for God.

In the traditions of Western thinking, sexuality has been laced with suspicion: that somehow lurking in its sacred character, thus understood, are the seeds of evil. Paul Ricoeur, in the *Symbolism of Evil*,³⁴ explores three governing symbols of evil—defilement, sin, and guilt—which, working together, color in advance our thought about sexuality. As "discourses"—i.e., governing frameworks of interpretation with their own power both to present and distort reality—they contribute to a map of sexuality that takes on different valuations as one moves into heterosexual or homosexual universes. To be aware of these "discourses" is to be aware

³⁴ *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon, 1967).

of the power of myth and language as they shape our thought, or as Ricoeur would put it, give rise to thought about sexuality.

The first of these, the symbol of defilement, refers to a quasi-material, quasi-moral “something” (an undefined quiddity) classically represented as a “stain.” This stain is given or imposed from without, often anonymously, and not directly incurred.³⁵ Defilement descends, as it were, from an original transgression, or series of transgressions, of an interdict or a taboo—transgressions perhaps committed in some mythical past. Generations of Catholics learned of the “stain of original sin,” a mark of defilement that came as a result of the original sin of Adam and Eve, inherited even before one could be found with any personal fault. The “original” sin of Adam and Eve, in turn, coincided with a sexual awakening, the recognition of their nudity. The stain, and the shame and terror that go with it, are acquired along with a nature that is otherwise pure. Subjectively, the stain of defilement may be experienced as the dread of bearing with evil and misfortune that comes through unsanctioned contact, a sense of contamination and/or of moral and quasi-physical infection or contamination.³⁶ This would not be unexpected where tenderness and the intensity of an interpersonal contact is absent or where sex itself is either a matter of duty or force. A sense of defilement thus carries within itself the dread of retribution or punishment, and of physical and psychic suffering as the ultimate price for having been defiled.³⁷ Well before any pangs of guilt arrive, the reality of unchosen defilement already colors sexual existence. One is, as it were, born into the imprisonment of an already defiled creaturely state.

Nowhere is this system of symbolic power more evident than in the defilement of violating sexual taboos. As Ricoeur holds: “The prohibitions against incest, sodomy, abortion, relations at forbidden times—and sometimes places—are so fundamental that the inflation of the sexual is characteristic of the whole system of defilement, so that an indissoluble complicity between sexuality and defilement seems to have been formed from time immemorial.”³⁸ Defilement itself is preethical; it may be, as symbol, intrinsic to human experience, but it does not in itself endow the defiled person with the burden of guilt, or fault. It might, on the other hand, orient him toward a state of guilt.

Purity stands as the antithesis of defilement, freedom from it, and indeed (in sexual abstinence) its preventative agent. Purity functions as both safe-

³⁵ Ibid. 28, 33–35.

³⁶ “The representation of defilement dwells in the half-light of a quasi-physical infection that points toward a quasi-moral unworthiness” (ibid. 35). The implications for an interpretation of AIDS are intriguing. See Sander L. Gilman, *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1988) 245–72.

³⁷ *The Symbolism of Evil* 32.

³⁸ Ibid. 28.

guard against potential defilement and a form of absolution of past defilements. Virginity is the ultimate prophylactic against further defilement, as well as the final moral answer to the existential givenness of defilement. “[V]irginity and spotlessness are as closely bound together as sexuality and contamination.”³⁹ The ideal of sexual abstinence, or even more, of intentional celibacy as a religious value and approximating consecrated virginity, could be seen as warrant against such a state of defilement, and at the same time, salvation from it. As has been noted, in the teaching of *Homosexualitatis problema*, the road to this ideal of purity is the Cross, where the suffering of the homosexual condition itself would seem to have a gradually purifying effect, leading the gay Catholic to a state of “perfect” chastity.

If defilement is the dominant symbol closely associated with sexuality, then sin and guilt are dependent upon this connection. Objectively, sin is bound up with the notion of a covenantal relationship with a personal God, and constitutes alienation from the covenant or at the very least a breach of it.⁴⁰ While it is an ontological reality (i.e., real and not imagined), sin has no existence of its own apart from the communal code that positively defines or describes it. It is a “nothingness” with a power and, like defilement, is fundamentally premoral.⁴¹ But unlike the symbol of defilement, which is received passively, sin as an objective reality involves any number of types of objective transgressions of the covenantal code. Subjectively, it is experienced in a mode of internalization (self-alienation) and consequent anguish.⁴² Its primary experiences are of fear of the wrath of the gods and of the suffering of punishment they might inflict (“Thy just punishments”). Sin can also exist in a proleptic state, as a tendency toward sin, a concupiscence. But even the tendency, if intrinsic to the person, constitutes a dangerous proximity to evil, an internalization of it even without personal fault. This symbol is arguably at work in the Church’s teaching about the “objective disorder” of the homosexual condition itself.

The antithesis of sin is neutralization of the alienation from the covenant, symbolized as redemption and return to the original relationship.⁴³ Again, it is important to understand here that sin is not primarily a matter of personal guilt or fault; its context is communal, and it is an experience that is shared, not suffered in the imprisonments of existential isolation. In this sense, sin is quite different from the notion of personal sin that emerges in Christian theological and moral discourses, and is also to be distinguished from psychological or even ontic guilt. This notion of sin, however is at

³⁹ Ibid. 29. Peter Brown has demonstrated how the ideal of purity governed some patterns of sexual renunciation in the early Church (see *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* [New York: Columbia University, 1988] esp. 175–76).

⁴⁰ *The Symbolism of Evil* 48, 50–52. ⁴¹ Ibid. 70, 52.

⁴² Ibid. 63.

⁴³ Ibid. 71, 77–78.

work behind the Catholic distinction between “objective” and “subjective” culpability, a crucial distinction lying behind the Vatican language of “objective disorder,” which is careful not to label homosexuality itself as sinful, but rather as a condition intrinsically ordered toward evil.

Guilt marks a shift from the covenantal context to the more personal realm, though it remains grounded in a sense of community (the polis) and presumes the givenness of the Law.⁴⁴ Guilt refers to the sense of being the agent or cause of some evil. One bears the weight of a fault, and is somehow responsible for the injustice accruing from the violation of a law.⁴⁵ This is similar to what people often think of as a “sense” of sin, understood as an existential burden. The measure of guilt is proportionate to the development of conscience, a sensitivity toward injustice and recognition of one’s conspiring in it, entailing undertones of both defilement and sin: “Guiltiness is never anything else than the anticipated chastisement itself, internalized and already weighing upon consciousness; and as dread is from the beginning the way of internalization of defilement itself, in spite of the radical externality of the evil, guilt is a moment contemporaneous with defilement itself.”⁴⁶ So there exists a circle between guilt and defilement, a circle held in tension by sin, whether actual or not. Guilt itself is marked by a sense of impending punishment, seen as justly earned through the lenses of scrupulous attention to the calculus of merit and reward. This sense of guilt is at work in the Book of Job, both from the standpoint of his interlocutors, and initially in Job’s own ruminations over his misfortunes. In an inverse way, it also lies behind much of the logic of the casuist tradition in its attempts to minimize the final attribution of personal responsibility for a particular moral fault.

The antithesis of guilt is the resumption of life that comes with grace, a renewed orientation toward the transcendent goals of human life, a resumption of life after the necessary catharsis of healing and amendment.⁴⁷ In this much, guilt carries within itself the promise of release from the suffering of sin and living in hope toward a new life. Certain theologies of the Cross and of vicarious suffering could serve to fulfill this cathartic function.

All three of these symbols of evil insinuate themselves into the rendering and construction of sexuality in a strictly pretheological sense. Guilt (or freedom from a sense of it) in the sense limned by Ricoeur attends any understanding of sexuality as imbedded in a moral consciousness. Sin as the breach of a covenantal relationship can mark the ordinary experience of many human beings even before this earns a particular theological reading, so that judgments about certain sexualities as primordial realities can be

⁴⁴ Ibid. 109.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 101.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 101–2.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 100.

made even before they are subjected to religious or theological interpretation, teaching, or objective judgment. And defilement, as something bestowed but not directly earned, is given with the interpretation of sexuality, not least of homosexuality, in various cultural settings. As pretheological categories, symbols of evil, these can function as presuppositions about human sexuality, even in the most theologically sophisticated of religious traditions. If these symbols are read naïvely, they can cease to function as interpretive symbols of the relations between human experience and the sacred, and instead can function as a priori principles of moral judgment. The result may be an a priori negative estimate of certain aspects of human sexuality that fall outside certain sanctioned categories of what will not break taboo, covenant, or law.⁴⁸ They may then color sexuality even before it is evaluated from a particular moral or theological perspective.

Yet this discussion of sexuality and its premoral coloration remains strangely removed from the dynamics of human love itself, and the ways in which one suffers love in an active sense. One wonders how some phenomenology of human sexuality in relation to human loving, and the suffering attendant thereto, might shed light upon the suffering attributed to homosexuality, and lead to a different counsel of the Cross than that so far offered by the Church. It is time now to turn to the second form of sexual suffering

In a short essay, “Wonder, Eroticism and Enigma,” Ricoeur offers what might be some of the most helpful pretheological reflection on the suffering entailed in human sexuality, both heterosexual and homosexual.⁴⁹ Sexuality is reducible neither to the pursuit of pleasure alone, the erotic,

⁴⁸ At this point the critique of Michel Foucault is apposite: a “regime” of power sustains “discourses” about human sexuality through religious, legal, medical, psychological and moral categories. What Foucault calls a “technology of power” serves to repress sexuality, but, as a result, actually fosters the generation of alternative discourses and even new sexualities. Foucault describes how the development of the penitentials around the sacrament of penance in the 17th century transformed sex into a rule for everyone, not only priests, monks, and nuns, and how the practice of examination of conscience, with its attendant habits of scrupulosity and casuistry, led to a spirituality of “blissful suffering” in the resistance of temptation toward any sexual transgression, no matter how minor or even elusive. Working in tandem with these discourses was the “discourse of silence,” which meant not only that sex was rarely spoken of, but that many silent assumptions were made and accepted about the natural foundations and limits of human sexuality. See *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1 (n. 2) 17–35. On “blissful suffering” see *ibid.* 23. Mark Jordan has argued that this resulted in a teaching characterized by reiteration, but not authentic rhetorical development, of some of these unspoken assumptions. See Mark Jordan, *The Silence of Sodom* n. 9.

⁴⁹ “Wonder, Eroticism, and Enigma,” in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, ed. James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 80–84.

nor to its “technical” ends, procreation and generativity. When reduced to the erotic alone, it becomes eroticism, “a restless desire for pleasure,” and an existential problem, for “it dissociates itself from the network of tendencies linked by the concern for a lasting, intense, and intimate interpersonal bond.”⁵⁰ But it cannot be reduced to its instrumental ends, either to means of procreation, or to its institutional sanctions, such as marriage or celibacy. Sexuality resists containment. Why is this the case?

First, because sexuality is bound up with eros, sexuality is prelinguistic. “Even when it makes itself expressive, it is an infra-, para-, superlinguistic expression. It mobilizes language, true, but it crosses it, jostles it, sublimates it, stupefies it, and pulverizes it into a murmur, an invocation. Sexuality demediatizes language; it is Eros and not Logos.”⁵¹ Therefore, our attempts to represent it or even to contain it within our various language games and, indeed, theological systems, is constantly challenged by the rather irrational, alogical character of sexuality that lies at its heart.

Second, because eros belongs to the “pretechnical” domains of human existence, the meaning of sexuality cannot be reduced to “technical” ends, such as procreation. Of course, sexual relations can lead to the generation of new life. But the point is that even when viewed from this perspective or when “controlled” through techniques such as various methods of birth control or, more generally, social mores governing sexual intercourse within marriage, sexuality “remains basically foreign to the ‘intention-tool-thing’ relationship. It is a surviving example of noninstrumental immediacy. The body to body relationship—or better, person to flesh to flesh to person—remains basically nontechnical.”⁵² For Ricoeur, this implies that arguments about sexuality that would correlate it with technical ends, such as the ends of nature, do not necessarily inhere within sexuality itself, but belong principally to the realm of interpretation rather than to an ontology inscribed by or in some transcendent Nature, or in a divine or cosmic pattern. Humans emerge from chaos, and chaos is inscribed in their creatureliness.

Third, eros, which is bound up with human sexuality, cannot be reduced to a sexual “act” or even to any particular institutional arrangement. Ricoeur is not arguing against the religious, cultural, and social normativeness of monogamous marriage between a man and a woman, but is suggesting that even this institution does not neutralize the volatility of eros: “[W]hatever one may say of its equilibrium in marriage, Eros is not institutional. One offends it by reducing it to a contract, to a conjugal duty.” The illogic of the erotic within sexuality in fact stands as a threat to the

⁵⁰ Ibid. 80.

⁵² Ibid. 84.

⁵¹ Ibid. 83.

desired stability of the institution of marriage itself. The only “law” governing eros is “the reciprocity of gift.”⁵³ Taking this a step further, when sexuality is viewed not as gift, but as institutionalized life contract ratified by a consummated sexual act (the marital act, duty, obligation, debt), then one has lost sight of something prior to these interpretations, something that cannot be evaded even within the institution of marriage itself: the uncontainable, restless quality of human sexuality that threatens cherished discourses, theologies, and institutions that one has constructed around it. These considerations constitute what Ricoeur calls the “enigma of sexuality,” a tension within sexuality that eludes resolution.

Yet, he argues, the power of eros within human sexuality need not result in eroticism, the triumph of the egoistic pursuit of pleasure over the ideal of mutual interpersonal exchange, and deep interpersonal bond. The countervailing power to eroticism is tenderness, which can also result from the powers of eros itself. But this tenderness as goal of sexuality is always threatened, internally, by the possibility of eroticism per se. And it is this very possibility that is the cause of suffering within the sexual domain of human existence. Sexuality exists in this ongoing tension between eros threatening to become eroticism, and the desire of human beings for transcendence in and through bodily bonding and tenderness, also the works of eros.

The issue is where eros finally tends. Here I would agree with Sarah Coakley, who argues that the erotic denotes not only the desires of the human heart, ultimately for a union with God, but also of “God’s proto-erotic desire for us.”⁵⁴ Perhaps the deepest form of sexual suffering is the frustration of this divine desire, the unrequited love of God for us, and of us for God, which finds its form within the enigma of the erotic itself, in the desire of finite beings to give and receive a love the finality of which is divine. One suffers in trying to give and receive this kind of love because ultimately one both loves and “suffers unto God.”⁵⁵ There is a sense in which the erotic leads to a Cross where love suffers in order to give of itself and thus attain its finality. If this is true of heterosexuals who love each other in monogamous marriage, might this not also be true of gay Catholics who yearn to love in a way that suffers unto God?

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Sarah Coakley, “Living into the Mystery of the Holy Trinity: Trinity, Prayer and Sexuality,” *Anglican Theological Review* 80 (1998) 223–32, at 230. But she also warns, “no language of *eros* is safe from possible nefarious application” (231).

⁵⁵ For the mysticism of “suffering unto God,” see Johann Baptist Metz, “Theology as Theodicy?” in his *A Passion for God; The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist, 1998) 66–69.

THE CROSS AS EXPRESSION OF DIVINE EMPATHY

I now return to my earlier question: Is there another way of embracing the Cross, a way of positive acceptance, that can speak a word of hope? One must find a way of acknowledging that suffering, as understood above, is indeed a part of gay Catholic existence, but move beyond some of the impassés at which Catholic teaching on homosexuality seems to have arrived, as indicated by this particular framing of the counsel of the Cross.

A second possibility for a theology of the Cross that might respond to sexual suffering is that developed in various places by Karl Rahner. For Rahner, as for John the Evangelist, the Cross stands not as a symbol of self-denial only, but also as a symbol of both God's own incomprehensible love for us in the death of Jesus Christ and our own call to embrace it:

Christianity is the religion which recognizes a man who was nailed to a cross and on it died a violent death as a sign of victory and as a realistic expression of human life, and it has made this its own sign. . . . Christianity has placed the cross on the altar, has hung it on the walls of Christian homes, and has planted it on Christian graves. Why? Evidently it is supposed to remind us that we may not be dishonest and try to suppress the hardness and darkness and death in our existence, and that as Christians we evidently do not have a right not to want to have anything to do with this aspect of life until we have no choice.⁵⁶

Toward what kind of theology of the Cross does such a view lead? For Rahner, a Christian response to the Cross entails (a) following Jesus Crucified in one's own being-toward-death, (b) a posture of gratitude toward the Cross shown in an authentic mode of self-renunciation, and (c) a love for God and for other human beings made manifest in empathic self-giving.

The following of Christ Crucified signals not only suffering in and with Jesus on the Cross, although that kind of piety is certainly not rejected, and is in fact embraced by Rahner.⁵⁷ But it signifies more: a posture toward life that sees death as the final limit, and Jesus as the trailblazer of that path through his own suffering and death. But Jesus' death on the Cross is only formally distinguishable from his glorification in Resurrection. So the suffering and self-sacrifice of the Cross, though an inescapable dimension of Christian life, is not an end in itself. For the suffering of the Cross is the

⁵⁶ *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. William Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978) 404. Rahner continued: "Christianity forbids us to reach for an analgesic in such a way that we are no longer willing to drink the chalice of the death of this existence with Jesus Christ. . . . [I]t is only when we live out this pessimistic realism and renounce every ideology which absolutizes a particular sector of human existence and makes it an idol, it is only then that it is possible for us to allow God to give us the hope which really makes us free."

⁵⁷ For a sampling of the many places where such an embrace is clearly laid out, see "Following the Crucified," *Theological Investigations* 18.157-70 and "Lent," in *The Eternal Year*, trans. John Shea (Baltimore: Helicon, 1964) 65-72.

path to new life. One is a Christian “only if he believes that everything positive and beautiful and everything which blossoms has to pass through what we call death.”⁵⁸ Following Christ Crucified therefore implies that all Christians, not just certain selected ones (the poor or degraded, or various minorities, including gays) have as a central part of their Christian vocation a consciousness of their own death, and of their heading toward it and through it. Jesus set his face like flint toward Jerusalem, toward his death and glorious destiny; so, too, the Christian, any and all Christians. The Cross is not the preserve only of a tragically afflicted caste. All Christians are “elected”⁵⁹ to the destiny of the glory of the Cross as an expression of love, even in and through their sexuality. The Cross thus leads to a focus on life, all that is symbolized in the Resurrection itself. If a Christian cannot live in the hope for life, in the joy that issues from suffering, then the meaning of the Cross has been diminished.

Second, the fundamental Christian response to the Cross is one of gratitude because it is in the Cross that God’s love is revealed. Rahner admits that it is difficult to see in the suffering and death of the Cross how precisely we are loved by God, especially in the face of our own sinfulness, and the cumulative effect of the many sins that lead to the Cross, (“the death-dealing revelation of sin which inflicts a terrible paroxysm on God himself who came into the world in order to destroy death by his own death”). But it is precisely here that we also encounter “the ineffable outpouring of His love which did not hesitate to sustain sin and death. Out of death and love” there has come such grace.⁶⁰ And so, in the face of this, the Christian posture is one of a gratitude that, with the help of God’s grace, leads to a self-abandonment to that same love that was revealed on the Cross. And while this does entail sacrifice, self-denial, and transformation, it is an embrace of a love that is fundamentally life-affirming and virtue-building. In this balancing of both dimensions of the Cross lies the “demand” of Christian asceticism: “This affirmation and demand are incomprehensible. Gratitude for the cross is certainly anything but a self-evident possibility. That we accept bravely and without self-pity the harshness that is a part of life together with its vitality, strength, and glory, is a demanding aspect of life that is by no means easy.”⁶¹ Rahner’s formulation balances both dimensions of the Cross—its darkness and its revelatory power—without

⁵⁸ *Foundations of Christian Faith* 404.

⁵⁹ “Can we say of ourselves that we carry the mark of Christ’s death on us as the sign of our election?” Karl Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, trans. Kenneth Baker (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965) 243.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 241.

⁶¹ “Gratitude for the Cross,” in *The Content of Faith: The Best of Karl Rahner’s Theological Writings*, ed. Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 309.

finally explaining it away or reducing it to a task. All are called to a courage that leads to joining in the sufferings of Christ on the Cross. Indeed, looking back to an earlier part of my investigation, we can now appreciate Rahner's final positive rendering of the concupiscence of human nature as "the form in which the Christian experiences Christ's sufferings and suffers them himself to the end."⁶²

This leads to an asceticism that may include renunciation, but freely embraced as a response to God's gracious initiative. There is definitely a place for the "carrying of one's cross" in this theology, for we cannot rid ourselves of the crosses of this existence, the imprisonments of our finite natures.⁶³ But how we go about this, and in what spirit of renunciation, is of the essence. A theology of the Cross that simply stresses the avoidance of what is a priori deemed evil may tend toward a form of latter-day Manicheism, stressing a flight from the world and nature, and seeing the world, and creation as God has wrought it, even in its variety, as something to be eschewed because tainted with evil. Renunciation of nature as it is given in the name of renunciation of evil can hardly comport with a spirituality of the Cross rooted in gratitude to God and desire to follow in the way of Jesus. On the contrary, we could fall into "a pseudo-ethical or pseudo-religious paroxysm of sacrifice which is not willed by God and which is basically not a real loving surrender to God's will."⁶⁴ Such would in the end become an act of despair, because it would not be the response to an invitation so much as an act of sheer will, hope against hope, which can only dissolve into hopelessness.

Second, the asceticism of renunciation, even of sexual renunciation in the evangelical counsels, can only come from a positive call by God as the result of a "believing gesture of love which reaches out beyond the world and its goods, even those of a personal nature." Rahner continues: "The fact that one may understand renunciation as an expression of such a shift of existence can of course be explained only by a positive (general and individual) call by God, and this in view of the fact that even positive acts can be sanctified and hence renunciation cannot in any sense be called the sole possible form of realization of transcending love . . . God must give his

⁶² "The Theological Concept of Concupiscentia," *Theological Investigations* 1.382.

⁶³ "No one can rid himself of the cross of this existence. But precisely for this reason it is difficult to know whether we accept this cross in faith, hope and love to our salvation, or whether we only bear it protesting secretly, because we cannot free ourselves from it but are nailed to it like the robber on the left of Jesus, who cursed his fate and blasphemed the crucified Lord by his side" (*Grace in Freedom*, trans. Hilda Graef [New York: Herder and Herder, 1969] 120).

⁶⁴ *Spiritual Exercises* 242-43.

special and express permission for this going beyond the world.”⁶⁵ While it is true that a Catholic understanding of faith includes the mediation of God’s intentions through the teaching and life of the Church itself, the call to this particular kind of asceticism is a call that can come only from God. The Church can only mediate that call, particularly through the sacraments. Sexual renunciation as response to an authentic call by God, as in the evangelical counsels, belongs to the eschatological character of the Church, and is a realization of that character, particularly in and through the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist.⁶⁶

In relation to this, and as has been noted in what is lacking in Church teaching on homosexuality, special attention should be directed toward the Eucharist. Rahner explains in his essay, “The Eucharist and Suffering,”⁶⁷ how the sufferings of Christ flow into the life of the Christian through the Eucharist in a threefold modality: as the sacrifice of Christ for us, as the means of God’s self-communication in grace, and as an intimate binding within the mystical Body of Christ. All three of these modalities emphasize God’s movement toward the person of faith. Participation in the sufferings of Christ are realized by virtue of the initiative of Christ toward us, even in the sufferings God allows us. It is not our place to “appoint” our sufferings and to “apply” them, as it were, to the sufferings of Christ: “No, the measure of suffering appointed to us is God’s disposing; it happens in accordance with the wise and inscrutable decrees of the one Spirit of God who distributes even these gifts of grace to the individual members of the Body of Christ, as he wills (cf. 1 Cor. 12:11). And this Spirit gives also the strength to bear each cross; together with the weakness of Christ, his strength also comes to dwell in us, and our weakness is given to us only so that God’s strength may be perfected in us.”⁶⁸ There is a concern here to avoid any Pelagian tendency to calculate salvation, in this case by appointing ourselves (or others) to the Cross. Rahner notes that while it is true according to Paul that we have been appointed to suffering (1 Thessalonians 3:3), and “that suffering and death are essential characteristics of Christian existence as such, necessary consequences and living manifestations of our being in Christ by grace,” the Eucharist is the sacrament of the constant growth and maturing of this life of grace.” He continues: “[I]t is the sacrament which meant to ensure that we live more and more “in Him” and become ever more like Him. Must not the Holy Eucharist then draw us ever more deeply also into the mystery of the Cross of Christ? . . .The

⁶⁵ “Reflections on a Theology of Renunciation,” *Theological Investigations* 3.54.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 55.

⁶⁷ “The Eucharist and Suffering,” *Theological Investigations* 3.161–70.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 170.

Eucharist, moreover, renews the memory of the sufferings of Christ even by letting Christ's sufferings flow over to us together with grace."⁶⁹ The emphasis is on the dynamic of participation in the sufferings of Christ: the sufferings of Christ are granted to us as part of the flow of God's grace *toward us*.

Third, a properly Christian asceticism will lead to love of God and neighbor. But an asceticism of the Cross that focuses only on an individual's combat with the flesh, and final victory over all of its chaotic unruliness, paints only part of the picture of a virtuous life, and arguably not the most important part. If a Christian wishes to grow ever more deeply Christian as such, following the Crucified, then this would, by the logic of faith, lead to a deeper sense of love both for God and fellow human beings—a movement away from oneself, to be sure, and toward involvement in the wider sphere of God's creation. Christian asceticism of the Cross leads to a spirit of empathy of one for another. It is modeled on God's own empathic entry into the world of human suffering in the person of Jesus, one who took on all forms of human suffering, including the burden of the sin of the world, endured them himself and redeemed them. It is further modeled on Jesus' own free acceptance of God's empathy, even in his own sufferings, manifest not only on the Cross itself, but in the patterns of his life. The Cross, though, stands as the climax of this life, the place where the divine empathy is both given and received, and so the Cross stands at the heart of a human-divine love that is first reflected in the human-divine reality of Jesus. Finally, this divine empathy, manifest in the empathy of Jesus for all, entails suffering for those other than oneself, the expression of a divine empathy. It is here that one's own suffering in the paradoxes of gay Catholic existence begins to become a path to joy: an asceticism built on an embrace of the divine empathy, leading to a life of tenderness—the fruit of *eros* become *agape*. This Christian possibility of an authentic joy in self-giving love is not sufficiently developed in the Church's current counsel to gay people that they take on the Cross of Christ.

The sufferings of the gay person can, in fact, lead that person beyond a stance of tragic victimhood and existential imprisonment toward a stance of uncanny empathy for those who suffer but who might not have a clue about the suffering of the gay person, because they have never known it first hand. Alternatively, the sexual suffering of the married couple struggling to live through years of fidelity, or of the divorced and remarried Catholics who feel estranged from themselves because in many ways they are estranged from the Church, could lead to an empathy for the sense of paradox lived out by many gay Catholics. It strikes me that this kind of empathy is in keeping with a positively interpreted theology of the Cross, one in

⁶⁹ Ibid. 167–68.

which the Christian enters willingly into the crucible of life, through love. It is not simply a theology of self-denial based on the assumption that one's creaturely inclinations are not only disordered, but essentially self-indulgent. It is a theology of the Cross based on the dynamics of a divine love that leads to joy.

Such a theology of empathy, could also lead to a deeper understanding of the Paschal Mystery as the empathy of God, an empathy into which God invites all Christians by virtue of baptism. This is the empathy of the divine entry into the pathos of human existence in a tender way. This manifestation of divine empathy in the Paschal Mystery of Christ could also open up the theological imagination of the Church's teachers and theologians toward other ways of imagining human sexuality and, more broadly, human nature, which is, after all, primordially established through and in God's self-revelation in the God-Man Jesus Christ. We could move beyond the dehumanizing effects of reducing sexuality to the human body and its functions, or of virtually reducing so much of human nature to matters of sexuality, and instead open up the symbolic value of sexuality itself as an icon of the divine tenderness and ultimately of the beauty of God.

Seen in this way, gay Catholic existence could be approached, not simply as a conundrum, a *problema*, something standing in the way of living the gospel, but rather as an invitation to a different way of looking at things, and toward a deeper embrace of the very gospel that threatens to subvert our most cherished notions about the God whose name is Love.