

HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE COUNSEL OF THE CROSS: A CLARIFICATION

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The September 2004 issue of this journal carried the author's article entitled "Homosexuality and the Counsel of the Cross." The Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) asked for a contextualization that would address the theological and anthropological foundations of the Catholic Church's teaching, demonstrate the reasonableness of its doctrine on homosexuality, and connect his reflections to that doctrine. Herewith is the author's response.

THE TEACHING OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH regarding homosexuality is found in the CDF's Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons (hereafter, *Hp*).¹ From this document basic principles can be derived for establishing a theological and anthropological foundation for approaching homosexuality as a problem and for understanding the Church's counsel of the Cross, which was the subject matter of my 2004 article. The following are the theological and anthropological principles contained in the Church's teaching that the article presumed:

(1) The teaching of the magisterium is intrinsically connected with tradition and Scripture, through the "supremely wise arrangement of God" (*Hp* no. 5; *Dei Verbum* no. 10). One of these elements cannot stand without the others. "The Church's doctrine regarding this issue is thus based, not on isolated phrases for facile theological argument, but on the solid foundation of a constant Biblical testimony" (*Hp* no. 5) and the tradition of the

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¹ CDF, *Homosexualitas problema*, *Acta apostolicae sedis* 79 (1987) 543–54; Engl. trans., Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19861001_homosexual-persons_en.html (accessed May 25, 2008).

Church, which are sources of knowledge for salvation. The Church's teaching has as its stated aim not only pastoral care but also the salvation of souls. In that spirit the magisterium offered its teaching in the 1986 Letter.

(2) The theological and anthropological foundation for this teaching is based on the theology of creation presented in Genesis. As the Letter states, "Human beings . . . are nothing less than the work of God himself; and in the complementarity of the sexes, they are called to reflect the inner unity of the Creator. They do this in a striking way in their cooperation with him in the transmission of life by a mutual donation of the self to the other" (*Hp* no. 6). This statement establishes three theological points about human beings and human sexuality in particular: (a) Human beings, in their totality, are made in the image of God (Gen 1:6–27). (b) Human beings, male and female, cooperate with God through the transmission of life (Gen 1:28) and thus embody God's covenant with the human race. (c) This cooperation with God in the transmission of life and the embodiment of God's covenant with the human race is accomplished through a mutual donation or self-gift of the male to the female, and vice versa. According to this teaching, Genesis 1 establishes, therefore, the "spousal character" of human sexuality and the natural end of sexual relations as originally ordered by God.

(3) In Genesis 3, however, we find that this "truth about persons being an image of God has been obscured by original sin" (*Hp* no. 6). One result of this sin is a loss of awareness of the "covenant character" of the union of these persons with one another and with God. This loss is reflected in part through the appearance of disorder in the original ordering of human sexuality (see Gen 1:16b). In light of this intrusion of disorder, we can understand the condemnations of the men of Sodom in Genesis 19:11–29, and the further condemnations of homosexual relations in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13—all examples of the disharmony within the original order that has entered the world through sin. Paul further develops this view in 1 Corinthians 6:9, Romans 1:18–32, and 1 Timothy 1:10. In Romans in particular, "Paul is at a loss to find a clearer example of this disharmony than homosexual relations" (*Hp* no. 6).

(4) The Church in her practice wishes to honor the original order of human sexuality established by the Creator. The objective complementarity between the sexes and the fundamentally spousal character of human sexuality together ordain men and women toward each other in the sacrament of marriage. Marriage, therefore, is the only sanctioned context for sexual relations, and these undertaken only with an openness to the transmission of human life. "It is only in the marital relationship that the use of the sexual faculty can be morally good. A person engaging in homosexual behavior therefore acts immorally" (*Hp* no. 7). This is the case because such acts violate the meaning and intention of God's design of human

sexuality. Because homosexual acts do not belong to a complementary union reflecting the embodied spousal character of human sexuality and cannot transmit life, such acts are objectively disordered. It is for this reason that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “tradition has always declared that ‘homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.’ They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved” (no. 2357).

(5) Homosexual acts are disordered, furthermore, because “they confirm within themselves a disordered sexual inclination which is essentially self-indulgent” (*Hp* no.7). This does not mean that homosexual persons are incapable of generosity (*Hp* no. 7), or that by virtue of a homosexual inclination they are self-indulgent persons, but rather that the term of homosexual acts is the subject rather than the spouse, and that therefore the inclination itself is objectively disordered.

(6) Another anthropological principle of the Church’s teaching, and one that is presumed in the language of objective disorder, is the authentic freedom of the human being before God. The Church’s concern arises from false understandings of freedom that would suggest that, if a homosexual orientation is not a matter of choice, then persons engaging in homosexual acts would not be considered morally culpable. But this position diminishes the authentic freedom human beings possess to make decisions about their moral lives. “What is at all costs to be avoided is the unfounded and demeaning assumption that the sexual behavior of homosexual persons is always and totally compulsive and therefore inculpable. What is essential is that the fundamental liberty which characterizes the human person and gives him his dignity be recognized as belonging to the homosexual person as well” (*Hp* no. 11). The Church’s teaching, therefore, “does not limit but rather defends personal freedom and dignity realistically and authentically understood” (*Hp* no. 7).

(7) From these premises there follows the teaching that homosexual persons are called to celibate chastity and are also “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” (*Hp* no. 12). This is a freely undertaken joining of one’s sufferings to the Cross, a free denial of self “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” (*Hp* no. 12). It is this counsel that was the actual focus of my article.

In light of these theological and anthropological principles, clearly stated in the teaching of the magisterium, I wish to clarify my earlier publication as follows:

First, in the absence of a fully-articulated presentation of the teaching of the magisterium on homosexuality in the article, it might seem that the

article implies that homosexual acts of those who do not think that they have a vocation to celibacy would not always be considered immoral. That was not the intention of the article. The teaching of the Church, which the article presumes, is clear and unambiguous, as further stated in the *Catechism* no. 2357 (which explains the immorality of homosexual acts) and no. 2359 (which calls homosexual persons to celibate chastity). The Letter, on which these passages are founded, states: "Christians who are homosexual are called, as all of us are, to a chaste life" (*Hp* no. 12). However, the article takes up the questions raised by some homosexuals who do not see that they have a vocation to celibacy, or who struggle to remain chaste, or who are seemingly not be able to receive this teaching as it is formulated. For those who are unfamiliar with the foundations of the Church's teaching on the objective disorder of homosexual acts, or with the Church's concern for the authentic freedom of homosexual persons, this counsel of the Cross, so valuable in itself and deserving of a wide hearing, can nevertheless risk being rejected because it may seem to them to be a formulaic answer to an enormously complex issue. Of course, the Church's teaching is not merely a formulaic answer to a complex problem. The pastoral task of theology is to make this clear by showing the virtualities in a teaching that might not be explicitly expressed. The purpose of the article, therefore, was to build on the Church's teaching and offer refinements to a theology of the Cross that might prove invitational to a reception of the Church's teaching and further the Church's pastoral mission toward homosexual persons.

Second, in the absence of a presentation of the theological and anthropological foundations of the teaching of the magisterium on homosexuality, the article might seem to question the reasonableness of the Church's teaching on the objective disorder of a homosexual inclination and the intrinsic immorality of homosexual acts. The article does not intend to deny the teaching of the magisterium about the objective disorder of homosexual inclination or homosexual acts. Rather, it intends to ask how the counsel of the Cross built on these formulations can speak with better effect and impart a sense of hope for those for whom it is intended. Precisely because it is offered not only as pastoral counsel but for the salvation of souls, the Church's counsel of the Cross in this teaching needs to be discussed and broadened for the sake of greater pastoral efficacy and appropriation by the faithful. The article is, therefore, keenly interested in seeing to it that the Church's invitation to homosexual persons, to join their difficulties to the Cross of Christ, be understood and appropriated as a counsel of hope.