

## A PASTORAL APPROACH TOWARD CATHOLICS IN SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

*Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. Mt 7:1*

The Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's 1986 letter to the bishops, *On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, says: "The human person, made in the image and likeness of God, can hardly be adequately described by a reductionist reference to his or her sexual orientation." [#16] Everyone is first a person. Personhood is more basic than one's sexual orientation. Even less does sexual activity (or the absence of it), a likely though not inevitable manifestation of one's sexual orientation, define a person. When talking of homosexuality we must never forget we're talking about real persons. The U.S. Bishops' Committee on Marriage and Family, in its 1997/98 pastoral message, *Always Our Children*, says: "With the help of God's grace, everyone is called to practice the virtue of chastity in relationships. Chastity means integrating one's thoughts, feelings, and actions, in the area of human sexuality, in a way that values and respects one's own dignity and that of others." [p.7-8] What does this mean to gay and lesbian people?

The church's position on sexual activity is clear—genital sex is permissible only within marriage. Yet, in the above and following statements, church leaders invite us to consider sexual activity in the larger context of chastity, and chastity as one dimension in the larger context of the person and his or her moral situation.

- 1 *Always Our Children: "Having a homosexual orientation does not necessarily mean a person will engage in homosexual activity." [p.6] Nor can we presume that all persons in a relationship, whether homosexual or heterosexual, engage in sexual activity.*
- 2 *Always Our Children: "More than twenty years ago we bishops stated that 'Homosexuals . . . should have an active role in the Christian community.' What does that mean in practice? It means that all homosexual persons have a right to be welcomed into the community, to hear the word of God, and to receive pastoral care. Homosexual people living chaste lives should have opportunities to lead and serve the community. However, the Church has the right to deny public roles of service and leadership to persons, whether homosexual or heterosexual, whose public behavior openly violates its teaching." [p.9]*
- 3 *On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1986): "In fact, circumstances may exist . . . which would reduce or remove the culpability of the individual [engaged in homosexual activity] in a given instance." [#11]*
- 4 *Catechism of the Catholic Church: "A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his [or her] conscience. If he [or she] were deliberately to act against it, he [or she] would condemn him[her]self." [#1790]*
- 5 *English and Welsh Bishops' 1980 Pastoral Letter: "Pastoral care does not consist simply in the rigid and automatic application of objective moral norms. It considers the individual in his (or her) actual situation, with all his [or her] strengths and weaknesses. The decision of conscience . . . can only be made after prudent consideration of the real situation as well as the moral norm . . . the pastoral counseling of homophile persons cannot ignore the objective morality of homosexual genital acts, but it is important to interpret them, to understand the pattern of life in which they take place, to appreciate the personal meaning which these acts have for different people.... The pastor may distinguish between irresponsible, indiscriminate sexual activity and the permanent association between two homosexual persons, who feel incapable of enduring a solitary life devoid of sexual expression. This distinction may be borne in mind when offering pastoral advice and establishing the degree of responsibility."*
- 6 *Vatican CDF theologian Father Jan Visser, one of the authors of the 1975 "Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics", discussing the document in a newspaper interview:*

(over)

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

7 Recent guidelines for confessors concerning some aspects of the morality of conjugal life, the Pontifical Council for the Family: *"the confessor is to avoid demonstrating lack of trust in the grace of God or in the dispositions of the penitent by exacting humanly impossible absolute guarantees of an irreproachable future conduct."* [#11] This is based on the moral principle that no one is obliged to do what is impossible for him or her to do. You're only expected to do what you can.

8 Detroit Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, when asked what he would teach:  
*"I will say what the church teaches--that to be actively homosexual is wrong. But every one of us has to come to terms with church teaching and apply it to our own lives in light of our own conscience with the guidance of the church. I don't make judgments about a gay person's conscience any more than about the military man at a SAC air base or on a Trident submarine who would fire a nuclear weapon if ordered to. I think in some ways the church teaching on that is clearer than on homosexuality. Any act of war that would destroy an entire city indiscriminately is an abomination. That is what nuclear weapons are all about. Anybody who has the intention of using such weapons is, in my judgment, in a situation that is drastically evil. And yet I cannot judge another person's conscience. If that person comes to communion, I cannot refuse."* [National Catholic Reporter, Nov. 4, 1994, p.6]

9 *Human Sexuality* (United States Catholic Conference, 1991: *"Whether one is facing specific moral decisions or broader vocational questions, the Catholic tradition speaks of discernment as that process by which a person uses one's own reasoning ability, the sources of divine revelation (Scripture and tradition), the Church's teaching and guidance, the wise counsel of others, and one's own individual and communal experiences of grace in a sincere effort to choose wisely and well.... Ultimately, each person...must discern his or her own moral decisions.... With all the input and support possible, both from individuals and communities, one must still face the future based on decisions made before God in the recesses of one's own heart. As the bishops at Vatican II phrased it, 'Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a person. There one is alone with God, whose voice echoes in the depths.'"* [p.22-27]

10 Rochester Bishop Matthew Clark, writing about his March 1, 1997 Mass with gay and lesbian Catholics, Families and Friends: *"They [people writing to Bishop Clark in support of this mass] and I recognize the norm that genital sexual activity is to be enjoyed only by men and women who are united in matrimony. But we recognize also that the practice of many individuals, homosexual and heterosexual, falls short of this norm, that circumstances strongly alter the nature of cases and that we are wise to leave the judgment of hearts to the God who knows all about us, our sin included, and yet continually calls us to deeper life. Such dispositions contribute much to the development of a church environment that allows all of us to accept, support and love one another as we try, even through our sins, faults and failings, to be generous and faithful in our response to God's love for us. Don't we all need that? I think so."* [April 24, 1997 Catholic Courier column, *Along the Way*]

These resources suggest a pastoral approach to gay and lesbian persons struggling with church teaching on sexuality, that is similar to the church's pastoral approach to persons struggling with church teaching on artificial birth control, pre-marital cohabitation, and masturbation. This approach assures that church teaching on sexuality is understood, that moral discernment and formation of conscience is understood, respects the informed consciences of the individuals involved, and then leaves the judgment to God.