

Let's *Talk* About Homosexuality

Part 3: Moral and Pastoral Considerations: What the Church Teaches... and Other Catholic Voices

Introduction

In this third part of our series, we look at the moral and pastoral considerations necessary to a thorough discussion of homosexuality. Specifically, we will summarize official church teaching, review the most pertinent Vatican and U.S. Bishops' documents regarding the topic, discuss the role of conscience in moral discernment and, lastly, acknowledge the tensions in the Church today among lay people, theologians and some clerics in regard to questions about homosexuality.

Segment 1: Official Church Teaching

"...homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered...contrary to natural law...[and] close the sexual act to the gift of life..."

Catechism of the Catholic Church [#2357]

The brief summary of points below is intended to be just that: a summary. For the reader who wishes to further explore official teaching, we can suggest Gerald D. Coleman's *Homosexuality: Catholic Teaching and Pastoral Practice*, Paulist Press, (with *imprimatur* and *nihil obstat* -- and Richard Sparks' *What the Church Teaches about Homosexuality*, St. Anthony Messenger Press, (with *imprimatur*).

In addition, complete texts of the Vatican and U.S. Bishops' documents summarized below are available online at www.vatican.va/archive and www.usccb.org respectively.

While certainly not exhaustive, then, the summary below highlights authoritative Church teaching on significant aspects of homosexuality.

On Homosexual Orientation:

- “[There are] persons for whom homosexuality is a permanent, seemingly irreversible sexual orientation. The medical and behavioral sciences do not yet know what causes a person to be homosexual.” (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, [NCCB] 1991, pp 54-55.)
- “The particular inclination of a homosexual person is not a sin.” (Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith [CDF], 1986, #3.)
- “It seems appropriate to understand sexual orientation (heterosexual or homosexual) as a deep-seated dimension of one’s personality and to recognize its relative stability in a person....Generally, homosexual orientation is experienced as a given, not as something freely chosen. By itself, therefore, a homosexual orientation cannot be considered sinful, for morality presumes the freedom to choose....Sexual identity helps to define the unique persons we are and one component of our sexual identity is sexual orientation.” (Always Our Children, [AOC], 1998, p.6.)¹

On Human Dignity:

- “The intrinsic dignity of each person must always be respected in word, in action and in law.” (CDF, 1986, #10.)
- “It is not sufficient only to avoid unjust discrimination. Homosexual persons ‘must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity.’ ” (AOC, p.9, quoting the Catechism, #2358.)
- “They (homosexuals) have a right to respect, friendship and justice. They should have an active role in the Christian community.” (NCCB, 1976, #52, and 1991, p.55.)
- “Those who are gay or lesbian...should not be objects of discrimination, injustice or violence. All of God’s sons and daughters, all members of our society, are entitled to the recognition of their full human dignity.” (*The Many Faces of AIDS:A Gospel Response*, 1987, United States Catholic Conference.)

On Discrimination and Social Justice:

- “Homosexual [persons] should not suffer prejudice against their basic human rights....We call on all Christian citizens of good will to confront

their own fears about homosexuality and to curb the humor and discrimination that offend homosexual persons.” (NCCB, 1991, p.55.)

- “It is deplorable that homosexual persons have been and are the object of violent malice in speech and action. Such treatment deserves condemnation from the Church’s pastors wherever it occurs.” (CDF, 1986, #10.)
- “Every sign of unjust discrimination in their [homosexuals’] regard should be avoided.” (Catechism, 1997, #2358.)
- “The teaching of the Church makes it clear that the fundamental human rights of homosexual persons must be defended and that all of us must strive to eliminate any form of injustice, oppression, or violence against them....Nothing in the Bible or in Catholic teaching can be used to justify prejudicial or discriminatory attitudes and behaviors.” (AOC, p.10.)
- “The Church has a serious responsibility to work for the elimination of any injustices perpetrated on homosexuals by society. As a group that has suffered more than its share of oppression and contempt, the homosexual community has particular claim upon the concerns of the Church.” (Social Welfare Commission for the Bishops Conference of England and Wales, 1979.)
- “The state has no business demanding that gays and lesbians project publicly its (i.e., the church’s) given set of moral values. Hence, homosexuals who make public their lifestyle or who advocate homosexual orientation and acting out as completely moral should not be excluded from employment as long as their activity does not disrupt the public order. The State should protect them against discrimination occasioned by their lifestyle....Church teaching indicates that even with regard to homogenital activity, no one except Almighty God can make certain judgments about the personal sinfulness of acts.” (*The Prejudice Against Homosexuals and the Ministry of the Church*, Washington State Catholic Conference, 1983)

On Homosexual Acts:

- “Homosexuality refers to relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex. It has taken a great variety of forms through the centuries and in different cultures. Its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained. Basing itself on Sacred Scriptures, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, 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.” (Catechism, #2357.)

- “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.” (Catechism, #2359.)
- “Only within marriage does sexual intercourse fully symbolize the Creator’s dual design, as an act of covenant love, with the potential of co-creating human life.” (Human Sexuality, NCCB, 1991, p.55.)
- “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.” (AOC, NCCB Committee on Marriage and the Family, 3rd Printing, 1998, p.8.)
- “Homosexual activity...as distinguished from homosexual orientation, is morally wrong.” (U.S. Bishops’ Pastoral Letter, To Live in Christ Jesus, November, 1976.)

Official Church teaching is pronounced in documents issued by the Vatican and by Bishops’ Conferences. To identify important documents on the topic of homosexuality, and to provide some recent historical context for these writings, we believe it might be helpful to look at significant points developed in these pronouncements over the last 30 years. This time frame begins about the same year the behavioral sciences recognized that homosexuality was no longer a mental illness or the deviant behavior of a heterosexual person, and spans a period that has seen significant changes in our understanding of sexual identity and the complex considerations arising from this new knowledge.

Here is a chronology of significant documents on homosexuality issued by the Vatican and U.S. Bishops’ Conference. ²

1973: Principles to Guide Confessors in Questions of Homosexuality
**Published by the U.S. Bishops’ Committee on Pastoral Research
and Practice**

This document repeats the Church’s traditional stand on homosexuality as contrary to the procreative purpose of sexuality and to the expression of mutual love of husband and wife. It is also significant because it:

- recognizes homosexuality as a “complex question.”

- recognizes that a person “does not will to become a homosexual.”
- encourages confessors to “avoid both harshness and permissiveness,” and not to insist on psychiatric treatment when there is clearly no hope for change in sexual orientation.
- affirms the need for, and encourages, stable friendships among both homosexuals and heterosexuals.

1975: Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics
Issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF)

This is the first Vatican document to acknowledge a distinction between homosexual behavior and homosexual orientation. It:

- differentiates “transitory” from “incurable” homosexuality, but does not explore the implications of this. In contrast to the 1973 American Psychiatric Association position, it considers incurable homosexuality to be due to “some kind of innate instinct or a pathological constitution.”
- recognizes that free consent is not always given in the sexual order, so “culpability will be judged with prudence.”
- concludes that “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and can in no case be approved” because they “lack an essential and indispensable finality,” and “In Sacred Scripture they are condemned as a serious depravity.”

1976: To Live in Christ Jesus
Issued by the U.S. Bishops

This letter goes beyond merely distinguishing between orientation and acts, and outlines an expanded teaching in the areas of pastoral ministry, human and civil rights and homophobia. The tone is more compassionate than the 1973 Confessor’s Guidelines. It says, for example:

“Some persons find themselves through no fault of their own to have a homosexual orientation....They have a right to respect, friendship and justice. They should have an active role in the Christian community. Homosexual activity, however, as distinguished from homosexual orientation, is morally wrong. Like heterosexual persons, homosexuals are called to give witness to chastity, avoiding, with God’s grace, behavior which is wrong for them, just as non-marital sexual relations are wrong for heterosexuals. Nonetheless, because heterosexuals can usually look forward to marriage, and homosexuals, while their orientation continues, might not, the Christian community should provide them a special degree of pastoral understanding and care.”

**1986: Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of
Homosexual Persons
Issued by the CDF**

This letter adds “complementarity of the sexes” to the 1975 CDF letter’s “finality” and scriptural arguments against homosexual acts. It proved to be quite controversial, perceived by many lay people and clergy as harsh in tone and less than pastorally sensitive with statements that:

- the inclination toward homosexuality itself is an “objective disorder” that is “essentially self-indulgent.”
- the inclination itself is “a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil.”
- homosexual persons seeking legislation favorable to their cause should not be surprised if “irrational and violent reactions increase.”
- “all support should be withdrawn from any organizations which seek to undermine the teachings of the church, which are ambiguous about it or which neglect it entirely.”

The merits of the letter were publicly debated in the Jesuit magazine *America*. In the February 7, 1987 issue, San Francisco Archbishop John R. Quinn wrote in support of the letter, highlighting its positive affirmations, such as, “The particular inclination of a homosexual person is not a sin.” Among his points:

- He states “every person has disordered inclinations” such as cowardice or hypocrisy, and that the letter calls the “inclination” disordered, not the person.
- He quotes the 1976 U.S. Bishops’ Pastoral to reiterate the Church’s pastoral concern.
- He concludes, quoting biblical scholar Richard B. Hays that, “Those who follow the Church’s tradition by upholding the authority of Paul’s teaching against the morality of homosexual acts must do so with due humility.”

Msgr. William H. Shannon, Rochester, NY, responded to Archbishop Quinn in the March 21, 1987 issue of *America*. He claimed:

- Collegiality (participation of the Bishops in the formation of Church teaching) was ignored in the letter’s development.
- The assumption that the letter’s teaching is based on the Church’s constant understanding of homosexuality is faulty.
- The purpose is not pastoral, but to state the inclination of the homosexual person is an “objective disorder.” This, he said, is “like telling someone that he or she is carrying a moral time bomb.”

Msgr. Shannon urged that debate aroused by the letter continue so as “to lead us to a deeper knowledge of God’s will concerning the very subject of that letter: the pastoral care of homosexual persons.”

**1991: *Human Sexuality: A Catholic Perspective for Education and Lifelong Learning*
Issued by the United States Catholic Conference (USCC)**

This booklet is considered a gay-sensitive summary of Vatican and U.S. Bishops’ teaching on homosexuality.

- It is the first Vatican or U.S. Bishops’ document to acknowledge bisexual orientation.
- It calls on Christians and others “to confront their own fears about homosexuality.”
- It calls for education appropriate to the age level and maturity of the learner.
- It says “parents and other educators must remain open to the possibility that a particular person...may be struggling to accept his or her own homosexual orientation.”
- It states, “the distinction between being homosexual and doing homosexual genital actions...is a helpful and important one.”
- It leaves orientation as a “disorder” out of the text. It relegates this to a footnote, saying: “To speak of the homosexual *inclination* as ‘objectively disordered’ does not mean that the homosexual *person* as such is evil or bad. Furthermore, the homosexual person is not the only one who has disordered tendencies or inclinations. All human beings are subject to some disordered tendencies.”

**1992: *Some Considerations Concerning the Response to Legislative Proposals on the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons*
Issued by the CDF**

This document was sent to U.S. Bishops as a “background resource offering discreet assistance to those who may be confronted with the task of evaluating draft legislation regarding non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.” The Letter’s major recommendations will be discussed in some detail in the final segment of this series. Among other points however, the Letter:

- States that “Such initiatives [i.e., legislation]...may in fact have a negative impact on the family and society....There are areas in which it is not unjust discrimination to take sexual orientation into account, for example, in the

placement of children for adoption or foster care, in employment of teachers or athletic coaches, and in military recruitment.”

- Repeats the idea stated in the 1986 Letter that “When such a claim is made [that the homosexual condition is not disordered] and when homosexual activity is consequently condoned, or when civil legislation is introduced to protect behavior to which no one has any conceivable right, neither the church nor society at large should be surprised when other distorted notions and practices gain ground, and irrational and violent reactions increase.”
- Suggests that “The majority of homosexually oriented persons who seek to lead chaste lives do not publicize their sexual orientation. Hence the problem of discrimination in terms of employment, housing, etc., does not usually arise.”

The letter was widely and publicly criticized in the U.S.

- Critics felt, in its statement that “neither the church nor society should be surprised” by violent reactions, the CDF was allowing that the *victim* could, at the least, be held partially to blame for any illegal or criminal abuse he or she might suffer.
- Critics felt the CDF was clearly implying that homosexuals could avoid problems of discrimination simply by staying “in the closet” – a choice considered decidedly unhealthy by most mental health and counseling practitioners.
- The letter was also criticized for ignoring evidence recognized by other Church documents. For example, concerning the employment of teachers, the Washington State Catholic bishops in 1983 wrote: “There are those who think that gays and lesbians inevitably impart a homosexual value system to children or that they molest children. This is a prejudice and must be unmasked as such. There is no evidence that exposure to homosexuals, of itself, harms a child....Accordingly, there is no need to make efforts to screen out all homosexually oriented persons from our educational system.”

1994: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

English version published by Paulist Press with Vatican approval

The Catechism summarizes previous official church teaching on homosexuality. In addition to stating that homosexuality is presented in scripture as a “grave depravity,” that tradition declares homosexual acts as intrinsically disordered, that they are contrary to the natural law and close the sexual act to the gift of life, the Catechism also:

- acknowledges that “the number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. They do not choose their homosexual condition.”

- calls homosexual acts “intrinsically disordered,” but doesn’t call the orientation disordered.
- says “everyone, man and woman, should acknowledge and accept his [or her] sexual identity.”
- Says “they [people with homosexual tendencies] must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity.”

**1997: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*
Definitive Latin Version**

Among some 100 changes to the 1994 edition is this one regarding homosexuality:

- The 1997 Latin version states, “The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, objectively disordered, is a trial for most of them.”
- This wording, which now marks the homosexual orientation as well as homosexual acts “objectively disordered,” replaces the wording in the 1994 edition: “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.” Note the change also deletes the Catechism’s former position that “They do not choose their homosexual orientation.”

**1997-1998: *Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministry*
A Statement of the Bishops’ Committee on Marriage and Family**

This widely welcomed document is, in the Bishops’ words, “an outstretched hand...to parents and other family members offering them a fresh look at the grace present in family life and the unfailing mercy of Christ Our Lord.” While confirming Church teaching on the immorality of homosexual acts, *Always Our Children*:

- tells parents, “Do everything possible to continue demonstrating love for your child.”
- encourages parents to listen to their feelings, acknowledge them, talk about them as necessary, “do not blame yourselves for a homosexual orientation in your child,” and feel free to insist: “You are always my child; nothing can ever change that. You are also a child of God, gifted and called for a purpose in God’s design.”

- encourages parents to reflect God’s unconditional love in two ways: 1) “Don’t reject your child...who has always been God’s gift to you.” 2) “Seek appropriate help for your child and for yourself”...but respect the person’s freedom to choose or reject professional help. AOC tells parents, “You can only change yourself,” and “to remain open to the possibility that your son or daughter is struggling to understand and accept a basic homosexual orientation.”
- says, “It seems appropriate to understand sexual orientation as a deep-seated dimension of one’s personality and to recognize its relative stability in a person....”
- accepts the use of gay and lesbian terminology, saying, “Language should not be a barrier to building trust and honest communication,” and recommends that church ministers use the words homosexual, gay and lesbian in honest and accurate ways.
- acknowledges sexuality as a gift from God, and that all are called to practice chastity, which means “integrating one’s thoughts, feeling and actions in the area of human sexuality, in a way that values and respects one’s own dignity and that of others.”
- encourages establishment and promotion of parent support groups and retreats and tells church ministers to “learn about homosexuality and church teaching so that your preaching, teaching and counseling will be informed and effective.”

In the next segment of Part 3, we will take a look at some of the important pastoral considerations surrounding homosexuality – and explore the role of conscience in making moral decisions.

Notes

Part 3: Segment 1 – Official Church Teaching

¹. The Catechism might appear somewhat ambivalent on this matter of choice. The copyrighted 1994 version of the Catechism states clearly the conviction that “[Homosexuals] so not choose their homosexual condition” (#2358). This statement was dropped in a subsequent revision.

² See Seeds of Hope, Compassionate Ministry with Gay and Lesbian Catholics and their Families, Volume 1, 3rd printing, March, 2003. A Practical Resource Manual, ed. Casey Lopata, Rochester, NY.