

## **Let's *Talk* About Homosexuality**

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

#### *Segment 3: Other Voices*

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*“It is the progressive revelation by the Spirit, rather than any given logion or biblical verse(s), that reminds us of what has been taught by Jesus. It is the Spirit who teaches us those things we could not bear earlier.”*

*... Theology Professor James T. Bretzke, S.J.*

*“When we die, and as a moral theologian I don't say this lightly, the only thing that will matter is how we treated each other.”*

*...Bishop Kenneth E. Untener*

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Whether we will it or not, the debate on homosexuality continues within the Church -- both in theological circles and parish pews. It would seem important to our understanding, then, that we have an awareness of what is happening in our Church. And that means, in turn, that we need to listen prayerfully not only to official pronouncements, but also to other voices respectfully raising their questions for a hearing. “We need to be careful,” writes Bishop Kenneth Untener, “that we do not say on the one hand that homosexuality is a complex question, and then treat it as though there were simple solutions.”<sup>1</sup>

A good deal of the tension among clergy, scholars, theologians, pastoral ministers and informed laypeople seems to originate with statements made in official Vatican documents promulgated over the past 18 years. These statements are considered by many to be seriously insensitive and pastorally harmful in the Church's ministry to the emotional, social and spiritual well-being of gay and lesbian persons.

A portion of the debate, however, goes beyond these important concerns to questions about the nature of the homosexual orientation itself, and about the morality of homogenital acts in a committed and enduring union. The question is asked: Is there a possibility of ethically responsible homosexual relationships – ones that might be morally justifiable if they can be expressive of genuinely constructive human love? A meaningful number of Catholic theologians – religious as well as lay – feel this possibility not only exists, but that it should be further explored within the theological community.

At the center of much of the existing tension in the Church are two documents released by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). The first, issued October 31, 1986, is titled *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*. The second letter-- officially published in July, 1992, but sent confidentially to U.S. bishops a month earlier -- is titled *Some Considerations Concerning the Response to Legislative Proposals on the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons*.

The 1986 Letter was issued toward the end of a period when U.S. Bishops seemed to be suggesting a more compassionate ministry to gay and lesbian persons -- based on the difference between orientation, which is neither chosen nor changeable, and behavior, which the Bishops continued to teach as morally wrong. The 1986 CDF Letter states:

“In the discussion which followed the publication of the [1975 CDF Letter on sexual ethics], an overly benign interpretation was given to the homosexual condition itself, some going so far as to call it neutral, or even good.

“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.” [The 1975 Letter had described only homosexual *behavior* as “intrinsically disordered” – not the homosexual condition.]

Later in the 1986 document, the CDF calls for the intrinsic dignity of each person to be respected in word, in action and in law. The Letter then states:

“But the proper reaction to crimes committed against homosexual persons should not be to claim that the homosexual condition is not disordered. When such a claim is made 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.”

Catholic parents of gay and lesbian children were shocked, saddened and angered. Did *their* Church really think *their* child was “intrinsically disordered”... “inclined toward evil”...and somehow *personally* to blame for any violence inflicted on them by gay-bashers? Nor did it help parents when a later interpretation was offered (citing the subtleties of philosophical language) that this “intrinsic disorder” is not a biological condition but “is a disorder because it is directed to an object that is disordered.”<sup>2</sup>

Theologian John McNeil saw the letter as a “step backward” for the Church’s spiritual ministry to lesbians and gays: “Since most gay people experience their

homosexual orientation as a part of creation, if they accept this Church teaching, they must see God as sadistically creating them with an intrinsic orientation to evil.”<sup>3</sup>

In light of unfavorable reaction, San Francisco Archbishop John Quinn distinguished “between affirmations of a doctrinal nature and affirmations that pertain to the realm of social commentary. The latter do not call for the same measure of assent as the former. Doctrinal affirmations witness the constant moral teachings of the Church; social commentary affirmations are judgments about the social effects of certain ways of thinking and acting and do admit of disagreement.”<sup>4</sup>

The 1992 CDF pronouncement, *Some Considerations Concerning the Response to Legislative Proposals on the Non-discrimination of Homosexual Persons* was issued in the midst of the U.S. presidential campaign. The document refers to six “relevant passages” from the CDF’s 1986 Letter, including the observations noted above, and then applies their meaning to judging the appropriateness of anti-discrimination legislation.

For example:

- “Sexual orientation does not constitute a quality comparable to race, ethnic background, etc, in respect to non-discrimination. Unlike these, homosexual orientation is an objective disorder...and evokes moral concern.” (#10)
- “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. (#11)
- “...An individual’s sexual orientation is generally not known to others unless he publicly identifies himself as having this orientation or unless some overt behavior manifests it. As a rule, 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.” (#14)
- “Do they [provisions of proposed legislation] confer equivalent family status on homosexual unions, for example, in respect to public housing or by entitling the homosexual partner to the privileges of employment which could include such things as ‘family’ participation in the health benefits given to employees.” (#15)

Vatican Press Officer Joaquin Navarro-Valls stated that the letter was “not intended to be an official and public instruction...but a background resource offering discreet assistance...” Nonetheless, reaction to the letter in the United States was swift – and ranged from acceptance to criticism to outright rejection. Fr. Robert Nugent writes,

“Response from the U. S. hierarchy varied from a minority of endorsements by a few cardinals and bishops to a majority of more cautious and delicately balanced expressions of support for the statement’s concerns about family life, coupled with a reaffirmation of a commitment to support civil rights for gay and lesbian people.”<sup>5</sup> Not surprisingly, reaction from the gay and lesbian communities and their families was much sharper.

Within days of receiving the pronouncement, Bishop Thomas Gumbleton issued this statement to the press:

“The [CDF] statement is clearly based on an ignorance of the nature of homosexuality. It is also totally in conflict with Gospel values that condemn discrimination and insist that we recognize the dignity inherent in all persons. The recommendations suggested to implement the 1986 *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* would make impossible any hope of acceptance of homosexual persons by the Church unless they deny or hide who they are. Based on His example, teaching, public ministry and outreach, especially to people marginalized or rejected by others, it is impossible to imagine Jesus supporting this call to discrimination.

“I cannot in good conscience accept the statement as consistent with the Gospel; nor can I justify implementing it.”<sup>6</sup>

Bishops Walter Sullivan and Charles Buswell joined Bishop Gumbleton in signing a public statement which rejected and countered many of the document’s major claims.

In the book *Voices of Hope*, editors Jeannine Gramick and Robert Nugent write: “Like its 1986 predecessor, the 1992 Vatican statement precipitated impassioned criticism from gay, lesbian and heterosexual Catholics....What shocked so many readers was the unprecedented call to justify active discrimination by appealing to a concern for marriage and family values.”<sup>7</sup> Here is a sampling of pertinent comments.<sup>8</sup>

*Milwaukee Archbishop Rembert Weakland:* “The Vatican Statement reflecting on anti-discrimination laws concerning housing and employment of homosexuals raises serious questions of discrimination, fairness and compassion.”

*Lexington, KY Bishop J. Kendrick Williams:* “I pray no one will use this document as an excuse for acts of hatred – the Gospel is clear about this. I pray that no one will use this document as an excuse to leave the Church.”

*Seattle Archdiocesan Catholic Gay/Lesbian Ministry:* “Nowhere in church history has the Vatican ever encouraged discrimination until now....The Vatican memo is filled with myths. They cannot substantiate any of the statements regarding homosexuality. Therefore, the document is unfounded.”

*San Francisco Archbishop John R. Quinn:* "...my policy and the policy of the archdiocese will continue to be what it has been: to affirm and defend the human and civil rights of gay and lesbian persons; to oppose unjust or arbitrary discrimination in housing or employment; to affirm and defend the church's teaching on marriage and the family; to affirm and defend the church's teaching on the distinction between sexual orientation and behavior, but especially *always* to remember that 'there are three things that last, faith, hope and charity. And the greatest of these is charity' (1 Cor. 13)."

*Msgr. James P. Lisante, Director of Family Ministry, Rockville Center, NY:* "The Vatican document fears that the United States may make homosexual rights equivalent to heterosexual rights. It endorses certain discrimination based on sexual preference or orientation. Quite frankly, such a position badly serves the Church."

*Theologian Fr. Russell Connors:* "It is my view that the greatest weakness of *Considerations* is precisely where its greatest strength needed to be: in articulating just *why* it is that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in the ways suggested is appropriate. What is it about the homosexual orientation itself that makes someone unfit as a teacher or coach, or, more controversially, as a foster parent?"

*Conference of Major Superiors of Men:* "We view this statement as a hindrance to the church leaders of the United States in this most difficult and sensitive area of human living....We are shocked that the statement calls for discrimination against gay men and lesbian women. We find the reasoning for supporting such discrimination to be strained, unconvincing and counterproductive....Moreover, we find the arguments used to justify discrimination are based on stereotypes and falsehoods that are out of touch with modern psychological and sociological understandings of human sexuality."

*Raphael Gallagher, C.Ss.R.:* -- "Whatever about the philosophical language used – which is itself the subject of a vigorous debate – the phrase [objective disorder] will continue to cause anxious confusion to homosexuals on a personal level. The pastoral problem here is a simple one. For some homosexuals there is no other 'order' but the one they have personally experienced, even if they never engaged in homosexual activity. These people will continue to feel that the Church regards them as outside the norm of valid human experience because their orientation is, objectively speaking, judged to be a disorder. Where does that leave them if, subjectively speaking, they know no other order of the experience of sexuality which is at the core of their personality?"

*Theologian John F. Tuohey:* "The absence of any evidence from the CDF that gay and lesbian persons pose a threat to society is easy to explain. No credible evidence exists....When [the document] suggests that gays and lesbians should simply keep quiet about their private lives to avoid violence and discrimination

(No. 14), the CDF exposes its ignorance of the psychological and self-inflicted violence among youth who struggle with their sexuality.”

*Theologian Gerald D. Coleman, SS:* “When homosexuality is understood principally as an orientation to certain sexual or genital acts, justice is not done to homosexual persons.... Consequently, the homosexual orientation itself is a manifestation of the capacity and need of human persons to grow in loving relationships that in some way mirror the life-giving love of the God in whose image and likeness we are all created: i.e., homosexuality is not an orientation to sexual activity *as such* anymore than definitive heterosexuality is. Any sexual activity must be seen in the context of the totality of the persons involved.”

And, finally, there is this reflection of Canadian Catholics Kenise and Fintan Kilbride – parents of two *heterosexual* children. Here are some excerpts, as printed in *Voices of Hope*, from a column published in the *Catholic New Times*.

“...We were struck by the coldness of the document, by its lack of insight and compassion, by how tortuous are its arguments made in the name of ‘protecting the family and society’ and, ironically, by its potential for dividing families in a most hateful and gratuitously painful way....

“We want what all parents want for their children: that they be reasonably successful, happy, productive, loved, and loving members of a caring society.... If one of our children had turned out to be homosexual, should any of that have altered? We have always hoped that our children would one day experience the joy and comfort we have found in our relationship as loved and loving partners. Would we say, ‘Oh, but not for you!’ to the child who had discovered a homosexual orientation?

“...Our position is not a rejection of celibacy, freely chosen by an adult for a serious personal, professional or religious reason; ‘celibacy for the sake of the kingdom’ has a long and honored tradition where it is the true choice of an individual rather than an arbitrary requirement. The church itself has taught that it is a special charisma given for the work of God. But celibacy as a life-sentence incurred for homosexuality is a very different matter.

“If one of our children had turned out to be gay or lesbian, how should our expectations of her place in society have changed? Would we have accepted more intolerance of her on the part of society? Would we have agreed that her basic human rights were diminished, and she could be barred like ‘contagious or mentally ill persons in order to protect the common good’?

“Theology is based on both the tradition of the church and the lived experience of the people. The lived experience of marriage and parenting, reflected upon in the

context of a life-long commitment to the gospel, convinces us that the church's teaching on human sexuality is in urgent need of reform."

But is reform or change or even a re-examination of Church teaching a prudent and legitimate consideration? Is the official teaching of the Church open to change? Is the Church's position ever likely to change on the subject of homosexuality?

Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen responded to this last question more than 20 years ago in a published interview with his archdiocesan director of communications:

"There are credible theologians in the church who say [the official position] cannot change; there are also credible theologians who believe that it can....It is important to recognize that certain aspects of the church's teaching on homosexuality have undergone development in recent years. We are coming to understand better, for instance, the important distinction between orientation and activity. The church, not unlike other institutions, draws from an increasing body of human knowledge in its reflection on the Word of God, which we call theology. An example of this is our understanding of Sacred Scripture which is constantly undergoing development that is in some ways revolutionary.

"Since [the letter] *Divino Affante Spiritu* of Pope Pius XII, no credible Catholic scripture scholar can be content with a literal or fundamentalist approach to the interpretation of Scripture on this or any other issue. When one adds to this the new developments in the human and behavioral sciences, it is not difficult to understand why theologians are continually involved in this kind of re-examination."<sup>9</sup>

Catholic theologian Charles E. Curran cites change that has occurred in the hierarchical magisterium's teaching:

"Perhaps the most significant change of the Second Vatican Council on a specific issue concerned the teaching of religious liberty. The major issue concerned not the teaching itself but the problem of change. How could the church teach in the twentieth century what it denied in the nineteenth? The problem was solved by a theory of development which claimed that the historical circumstances had changed so that the church was right in both centuries."<sup>10</sup>

Bishop Thomas Gumbleton offers an example of how Church teaching on sexuality has dramatically changed over time:

"The Catholic Church's teaching about moral questions regarding marriage and sexuality, questions of intimacy, of one person loving another, has undergone enrichment over the centuries. This has happened especially in modern times when moral theology began to use the insights drawn from the lived experience of married men and women.

“An example of early Church teaching on marriage, and specifically the place of sex, is found in a directive from Pope Gregory I to St. Augustine, the first archbishop of Canterbury in the beginning of the seventh century, ‘Since even the lawful intercourse of the wedded cannot take place without pleasure of the flesh, entrance into a sacred place shall be abstained from because the pleasure itself can by no means be without sin.’

“Such a directive expresses a clearly negative attitude toward sex in marriage and the pleasure to be found in married love. The Church was teaching that it was sinful to enjoy and relish one’s sexual love. It was sinful and would preclude participation in the Eucharist.

“Today, we have people writing moral theology textbooks and treatises who are lay people, many of whom are in a married relationship, and many who are women. This development offers opportunities for new perspectives. In fact, Pope John Paul II has given us a document, a lyrical and beautiful document about married life and married love, which totally transcends what Pope Gregory said. And so we have evolved our teaching substantially in what we understand as morally good and morally healthy.”<sup>11</sup>

John T. Noonan Jr. is a leading historian of legal and moral issues. He writes in *America* magazine on the development of doctrine, claiming that Christianity is not a museum relic, but alive in the living people of God: “The law of life, as each of us knows from our own lives, is change. As John Henry Newman put it in 1843 in *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, ‘In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below, to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.’ ”<sup>12</sup>

Noonan then looks at several “moral developments that have occurred since the New Testament was written.” He traces the doctrinal evolution:

“*Death Penalty*: ... was not condemned as intrinsically immoral by Christians of the empire. Christian emperors did not hesitate to employ it. Individual bishops sought mercy but only in individual cases. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century the church accepted the death penalty as the appropriate penalty for a recalcitrant heretic. During the Counter-Reformation, eminent theologians defended the church’s role in securing the elimination of heretics in this way. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after World War II, the church began to see matters differently. In 1995, in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II found conditions justifying the death penalty as necessary to the defense of society ‘very rare, if in fact, they occur at all.’ The moral judgment about the death penalty is a very interesting instance of a moral rule in transition.

“*Religious Liberty*: Christ forced no one to believe. The Apostles followed his example. But after Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire,

imperial force was employed on behalf of orthodoxy. The Donatists, ultra-conservative in not forgiving apostasy, were compelled by beatings to return to the faith; St. Augustine approved and defended the coercion exercised. In the Middle Ages deadly force was used against lapsed heretics and defended by the theologians....Only in 1965, in the “Declaration on Religious Freedom,” did the Second Vatican Council proclaim the right of every person to be free from governmental coercion bearing on religious faith. What had once been theologically seen as an obligation (the duty of the state to repress heresy) was now theologically seen as an invasion of the human person.

“*Slavery*: ...was accepted by the early Christians as a social institution. Kindness to slaves was recommended; [release from servitude] was acknowledged as a deed of charity; but as St. Augustine crisply put it, ‘Christ did not make men free from being slaves’....Only after slavery had been abolished by all European nations, by the United States and by Brazil did Pope Leo XIII issue a general condemnation of human bondage....John Paul II has declared slavery to be intrinsically evil. Once morally licit...slaveholding has become seriously sinful behavior.

“*Usury*: Opposition to exploiting a fellow Jew in lending appears in the Old Testament. Jesus is reported in the Gospel of Luke as teaching, ‘Lend freely, hoping nothing thereby’ (6:35). In the patristic period, excessive interest was condemned as cruel. Beginning about 1150, the moral rule was laid down that it was wrong to make a profit from a loan. ‘Lend freely, hoping nothing thereby’ was papally interpreted as a commandment. Popes, councils, bishops, theologians joined in the condemnation of usury, understood as anything added to the principal of a loan.

“In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as the economy of Europe became more commercial, profitable alternative ways of extending credit were recognized by the theologians engaged in a fierce battle with curial conservatives. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the old usury rule was a shadow, formally maintained by the papacy, ineffective in practice. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, investments in banks were commonplace for popes, bishops and ordinary Christian folk. What had been prohibited had become lawful.”

So why did “the impermissible become permissible?” Noonan says the developments depend, in part, on changes in social conditions – and, in part, on change in perspective and theological analysis. He adds, “In every instance, too, it may be fairly contended, the developments have reflected a deeper insight into the Gospel, a fuller realization of its message, a greater conformity to Christ.”

Theologian Joseph Selling acknowledges developmental change but predicts disappointment for those in a hurry: “...the terrain covered by the field of (Christian ) ethics is one of change, evolution, and cultural and historical particularity. Sometimes it

takes a very long time for a community to understand or even permit the impact of the Gospel message to take hold.”<sup>13</sup>

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**Next week, in the final segment of our series, we look briefly at other questions pertinent to an understanding of the discussion on homosexuality within our Church.**

*Notes*

*Part 3: Segment 3: Other Voices*

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth E. Untener. “Hallmarks of the Church,” an address delivered at a New Ways Ministry Symposium on March 28, 1992, printed in Voices of Hope, (New York: Center for Homophobia Education, 1995), eds., Jeannine Gramick and Robert Nugent, p.153.

<sup>2</sup> John R. Quinn. “Toward an Understanding of the Letter ‘On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,’ ” from The Vatican and Homosexuality, (New York: Crossroad, 1998), eds., Jeannine Gramick and Pat Furey, pp. 13-19.

<sup>3</sup> John J. McNeill. “The Church and the Homosexual,” (Boston: Beacon Press, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 1993), p.xiv.

<sup>4</sup> John R. Quinn, p. 179.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Nugent. “The Civil Rights of Homosexual People: Vatican Perspectives,” *New Theology Review*, November, 1994, pp.72-86.

<sup>6</sup> Taken from “Voices of Hope,” pp.187-188.

<sup>7</sup> Jeannine Gramick and Robert Nugent. “Voices of Hope,” pp176-179.

<sup>8</sup> See “Voices of Hope,” pp. 182ff.

<sup>9</sup> See “Voices of Hope,” pp. 24-25.

<sup>10</sup> Charles E. Curran. “Is There Any Good News in the Recent Documents from the Vatican about Homosexuality,” an address delivered after receiving the Bridge Building Award from New Ways Ministry, September 13, 1992, from Voices of Hope, p.171.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas J. Gumbleton. “A Call to Listen: The Church’s Pastoral and Theological Response to Gays and Lesbians,” eds., Patricia Beattie Jung, with Joseph Andrew Coray (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> John T. Noonan, Jr. “On the Development of Doctrine,” *America*, April 3, 1999

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Selling. “The Development of Catholic Tradition and Sexual Morality,” Embracing Sexuality: Authority and Experience in the Catholic Church, ed., Joseph A. Selling (Aladshot, Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2001).