

CATHOLIC TEACHING ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY AND PRACTICE AMONG CLERGY

Certainly it is time to have an intelligent and informed dialogue about homosexuality in the Catholic Church—among the clergy and laity. That is not easy because in history Christian thought has branded gayness in various hideous and distorted terms, most recently as an *intrinsic disorder*.

- All scientific, psychological, biological, cultural, developmental, pastoral and spiritual expertise must be summoned to calm and rational discourse so important for the lives of millions of men and women.

Eminent among those in need of sensible and honest thoughtful exchange about homosexuality are Catholic bishops and priests whose numbers include a significant proportion of gay oriented men. A conservative estimate of gay Catholic clergy in the US is thirty percent. That figure has held steady for several decades in the face of assiduous scrutiny; many Vatican insiders speculate that the accurate number is closer to fifty percent.

Homosexual orientation, either in the Catholic clergy or in the general population, is no more a fundamental danger to moral and social stability than heterosexually oriented men (women). In fact the roster of Christian saints is full (some say loaded) with gay men and women.

The church documents listed below are testimony to the long laborious struggle spiritually minded men have had with human sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular.

Recent pronouncements from Vatican officials reemphasize

the depth of the misconceptions about human sexuality that persist. *Intrinsic* is the judgment that betrays the misguided and false absolutistic position the church maintains about sex.

- Masturbation, sex prior to marriage, or out-side of it, birth control and homosexual activity are *NOT intrinsically evil*. They are behaviors—complex human behaviors—that need to be sorted out on a host of levels from the practical to the scientific-spiritual-theoretical. To cast them all into the wastebasket of the absolutistic-intrinsic is wrong, and at this stage of knowledge—unbelievable-stupid.

Whether gay oriented or merely opportunistically experimenting, bishops and priests in large numbers get involved in homosexual behaviors.

Frequently seminary staff and spiritual directors target men in training for their gratification under the guise of fraternal love. There is no doubt that affectionate feelings can exist between teacher and student; they, however, are no excuse for sexual seduction or expression.

Some seminaries tolerate same-sex experimentation and a few professors endorse it as a beneficial developmental experience. Some rectors and professors encourage heterosexual experimentation to “set their students straight”. This knowledge comes from first-hand statements.

Within the confessional and spiritual direction priests secretly sanction sexual acting out and consider “lapses” minor faults rather than indications of behavioral or developmental problems in need of serious consideration.

Mandatory celibacy is neither rational nor practicable. The

Church's' persistent insistence on an obligatory promise of "perfect and perpetual chastity, therefore celibacy" in order to be ordained a priest is not only misguided it is monstrous and a source and cover for evil.

- This promise is rarely kept in any perfect or perpetual sense.

Religious celibacy is a rare and precious spiritual treasure. It cannot be boxed and gift-wrapped. Practiced religious celibacy defies obligation from external authority; it is an individual gift—charism. Institutions can support celibate practice, but it cannot be institutionalized.

Misconceptions among clergy about the nature of celibacy lead to myriad rationalizations, self-deceptions, and patently distorted behaviors and double-lives.

The sacrament of reconciliation designed to assist the process of moral refinement, growth and virtue is frequently used by clergy to cover up their own or others' sins and malfeasance. Excuses abound from "father is only human" to "everybody sins" to "it's no big deal" to "avoid scandal" *ad infinitum*.

The confessional is an-all-too-common site for clergy to set their sights on vulnerable victims for abuse. This is especially true for young boys and girls who tend to be open and trusting and concerned about their sexual feelings and need for friendship.

The seminary system reflecting current Vatican teaching is generally seriously confused about human sexuality in practice.

- There are NO adequate training programs for celibacy

or human sexuality in any US seminary or religious house. That is not hyperbole. The proof is in the product. Catholic clergy maintain a low level of psychosexual maturity—the system favors subservient adolescent-like men. Those who can negotiate the system tend to develop sociopathic mechanisms. These are the men who get promoted to positions of control and management in greater proportion than more mature and independent characters.

- Homosexual oriented priests/bishops need not be the problem, but some are. Hypocrisy in teaching and behavior by clergy is a major problem. Gay love (and behavior) is not intrinsically evil. But celibacy is a way of life (like sobriety), a daily effort and achievement. If professed it should be practiced.

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Marcia Darnell (mardarnell@gmail.com) has compiled some of the major church texts quoted below that need to be understood in dialogue with those who do not yet understand the *Nature of Human Sexuality* and the reality of God given sexual diversity. All of these accounts testify to the occurrence of these behaviors even among clerics and the incomplete, and even distorted understanding of sexual human nature.

"The Code of Canon Law undertaken at the initiative and encouragement of **Saint Pius X**, and published in 1917 by his successor **Pope Benedict XV**, says this: "So far as laymen are concerned, the sin of sodomy is punished *ipso facto* with the pain of infamy and other sanctions to be applied according to the prudent judgment of the Bishop depending on the gravity of each case (Can. 2357). As for ecclesiastics and religious, if they are *clerici minoris* [that is, of the degree lower than deacon], let them be punished with various measures, proportional to the gravity of the fault, that can even include dismissal from the clerical state (Can. 2358); if they are *clerici maiores* [that is, deacons, priests or bishops], let them 'be

declared *infamous* and suspended from every post, benefit, dignity, deprived of their eventual stipend and, in the gravest cases, let them be deposed' (Can. 2359, par. 2)"

Tertullian, the great apologist of the Church in the second century, writes: "All other frenzies of lusts which exceed the laws of nature and are impious toward both bodies and the sexes we banish ... from all shelter of the Church, for they are not sins so much as monstrosities." (Tertullian, *De pudicitia*, IV, in J. McNeil, *op. cit.*, p. 89)

Saint Basil of Caesarea, the fourth century Church Father who wrote the principal rule of the monks of the East, establishes this: "The cleric or monk who molests youths or boys or is caught kissing or committing some turpitude, let him be whipped in public, deprived of his crown [tonsure] and, after having his head shaved, let his face be covered with spittle; and [let him be] bound in iron chains, condemned to six months in prison, reduced to eating rye bread once a day in the evening three times per week. After these six months living in a separate cell under the custody of a wise elder with great spiritual experience, let him be subjected to prayers, vigils and manual work, always under the guard of two spiritual brothers, without being allowed to have any relationship ... with young people." (St. Basil of Caesarea, in St. Peter Damien, *Liber Gomorrhianus*, *op. cit.* cols. 174f.)

Saint Augustine is categorical in the combat against sodomy and similar vices. The great Bishop of Hippo writes: "Sins against nature, therefore, like the sin of Sodom, are abominable and deserve punishment whenever and wherever they are committed. If all nations committed them, all alike would be held guilty of the same charge in God's law, for our Maker did not prescribe that we should use each other in this way. In fact, the relationship that we ought to have with God is itself violated when our nature, of which He is Author, is desecrated by perverted lust." Further on he reiterates: "Your punishments are for sins which men commit against themselves, because, although they sin against You, they do wrong in their own souls and their malice is self-betrayed. They corrupt and pervert their

own nature, which You made and for which You shaped the rules, either by making wrong use of the things which You allow, or by becoming inflamed with passion to make unnatural use of things which You do not allow” (Rom. 1:26). (St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book III, chap. 8)

Saint John Chrysostom denounces homosexual acts as being contrary to nature. Commenting on the Epistle to the Romans (1: 26-27), he says that the pleasures of sodomy are an unpardonable offense to nature and are doubly destructive, since they threaten the species by deviating the sexual organs away from their primary procreative end and they sow disharmony between men and women, who no longer are inclined by physical desire to live together in peace.

The brilliant Patriarch of Constantinople employs most severe words for the vice we are analyzing. Saint John Chrysostom makes this strong argument: “All passions are dishonorable, for the soul is even more prejudiced and degraded by sin than is the body by disease; but the worst of all passions is lust between men.... The sins against nature are more difficult and less rewarding, since true pleasure is only the one according to nature. But when God abandons a man, everything is turned upside down! Therefore, not only are their passions [of the homosexuals] satanic, but their lives are diabolic..... So I say to you that these are even worse than murderers, and that it would be better to die than to live in such dishonor. A murderer only separates the soul from the body, whereas these destroy the soul inside the body..... There is nothing, absolutely nothing more mad or damaging than this perversity.” (St. John Chrysostom, *In Epistulam ad Romanos IV*, in J. McNeill, op. cit., pp. 89-90)

Saint Gregory the Great delves deeper into the symbolism of the fire and brimstone that God used to punish the sodomites: “Brimstone calls to mind the foul odors of the flesh, as Sacred Scripture itself confirms when it speaks of the rain of fire and brimstone poured by the Lord upon Sodom. He had decided to punish in it the crimes of the flesh, and the very type of punishment emphasized the shame of

that crime, since brimstone exhales stench and fire burns. It was, therefore, just that the sodomites, burning with perverse desires that originated from the foul odor of flesh, should perish at the same time by fire and brimstone so that through this just chastisement they might realize the evil perpetrated under the impulse of a perverse desire.” (St. Gregory the Great, *Commento morale a Giobbe*, XIV, 23, vol. II, p. 371, *Ibid.*, p. 7)

Saint Peter Damian’s *Liber Gomorrhianus* [Book of Gomorrha], addressed to Pope Leo IX in the year 1051, is considered the principal work against homosexuality. It reads: “Just as Saint Basil establishes that those who incur sins [against nature] ... should be subjected not only to a hard penance but a public one, and Pope Siricius prohibits penitents from entering clerical orders, one can clearly deduce that he who corrupts himself with a man through the ignominious squalor of a filthy union does not deserve to exercise ecclesiastical functions, since those who were formerly given to vices ... become unfit to administer the Sacraments.” (St. Peter Damian, *op. cit.*, cols. 174f)

St. Peter Damian also writes:

“This vice strives to destroy the walls of one’s heavenly motherland and rebuild those of devastated Sodom. Indeed, it violates temperance, kills purity, stifles chastity and annihilates virginity ... with the sword of a most infamous union. It infects, stains and pollutes everything; it leaves nothing pure, there is nothing but filth ... This vice expels one from the choir of the ecclesiastical host and obliges one to join the energumens and those who work in league with the devil; it separates the soul from God and links it with the demons. This most pestiferous queen of the Sodomites [which is homosexuality] makes those who obey her tyrannical laws repugnant to men and hateful to God ... It humiliates at church, condemns at court, defiles in secret, dishonors in public, gnaws at the person’s conscience like a worm and burns his flesh like fire... “The miserable flesh burns with the fire of lust, the cold intelligence trembles under the rancor of suspicion, and the unfortunate man’s heart is possessed by hellish chaos, and his pains of conscience are

as great as the tortures in punishment he will suffer ... Indeed, this scourge destroys the foundations of faith, weakens the force of hope, dissipates the bonds of charity, annihilates justice, undermines fortitude, ... and dulls the edge of prudence. “What else shall I say? It expels all the forces of virtue from the temple of the human heart and, pulling the door from its hinges, introduces into it all the barbarity of vice ... In effect, the one whom ... this atrocious beast [of homosexuality] has swallowed down its bloody throat is prevented, by the weight of his chains, from practicing all good works and is precipitated into the very abysses of its uttermost wickedness. Thus, as soon as someone has fallen into this chasm of extreme perdition, he is exiled from the heavenly motherland, separated from the Body of Christ, confounded by the authority of the whole Church, condemned by the judgment of all the Holy Fathers, despised by men on earth, and reproved by the society of heavenly citizens. He creates for himself an earth of iron and a sky of bronze ... He cannot be happy while he lives nor have hope when he dies, because in life he is obliged to suffer the ignominy of men’s derision and later, the torment of eternal condemnation” (*Liber Gomorrhianus*, in PL 145, col. 159-178).

Saint Albert the Great gives four reasons why he considers homosexual acts as the most detestable ones: They are born from an ardent frenzy; they are disgustingly foul; those who become addicted to them are seldom freed from that vice; they are as contagious as disease, passing quickly from one person to another. (St. Albert the Great, *In Evangelium Lucae XVII*, 29, in J. McNeill, op. cit., p. 95)

Saint Thomas Aquinas, writing about sins against nature, explains: “However, they are called passions of ignominy because they are not worthy of being named, according to that passage in Ephesians (5:12): ‘For the things that are done by them in secret, it is a shame even to speak of.’ For if the sins of the flesh are commonly censurable because they lead man to that which is bestial in him, much more so is the sin against nature, by which man debases himself lower than even his animal nature.” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Epistulas Sancti Pauli Ad Romanum I*, 26, pp. 27f)

Saint Bonaventure, speaking in a sermon at the church of Saint Mary of Portiuncula about the miracles that took place simultaneously with the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, narrates this: “Seventh prodigy: All sodomites—men and women—died all over the earth, as Saint Jerome said in his commentary on the psalm ‘The light was born for the just.’ This made it clear that He was born to reform nature and promote chastity.” (St. Bonaventure, *Sermon XXI—In Nativitate Domini*, in *Catolicismo* (Campos/Sao Paulo), December 1987, p. 3; F. Bernardei, op. cit., p. 11)

Saint Catherine of Siena, a religious mystic of the 14th century, relays words of Our Lord Jesus Christ about the vice against nature, which contaminated part of the clergy in her time. Referring to sacred ministers, He says: “They not only fail from resisting this frailty [of fallen human nature] ... but do even worse as they commit the cursed sin against nature. Like the blind and stupid, having dimmed the light of their understanding, they do not recognize the disease and misery in which they find themselves. For this not only causes me nausea, but displeases even the demons themselves, whom these miserable creatures have chosen as their lords. For me, this sin against nature is so abominable that, for it alone, five cities were submersed, by virtue of the judgment of My Divine Justice, which could no longer bear them.... It is disagreeable to the demons, not because evil displeases them and they find pleasure in good, but because their nature is angelic and thus is repulsed upon seeing such an enormous sin being committed. It is true that it is the demon who hits the sinner with the poisoned arrow of lust, but when a man carries out such a sinful act, the demon leaves.” (St. Catherine of Siena, *El diálogo*, in *Obras de Santa Catarina de Siena* (Madrid: BAC, 1991), p. 292)

Saint Bernardine of Siena, a preacher of the fifteenth century, makes a psychological analysis of the consequences of the homosexual vice. The illustrious Franciscan writes: “No sin has greater power over the soul than the one of cursed sodomy, which was always detested by all those who lived according to God..... Such passion for undue forms borders on madness. This vice disturbs the intellect, breaks an elevated and generous state of soul,

drags great thoughts to petty ones, makes [men] pusillanimous and irascible, obstinate and hardened, servile soft and incapable of anything. Furthermore, the will, being agitated by the insatiable drive for pleasure, no longer follows reason, but furor.... Someone who lived practicing the vice of sodomy will suffer more pains in Hell than any one else, because this is the worst sin that there is." (St. Bernardine of Siena, *Predica XXXIX*, in *Le prediche volgari* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1936), pp. 869ff., 915, in F. Bernadei, *op. cit.*, pp. 11f)