

The Challenge of Change: Acceptance, Faith and Homosexuality in the Catholic Church

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Introduction

For the past 60 years, sexual ethics and moral theology have been at the foreground of debate within the Catholic Church. Numerous so-called ‘pelvic issues’ have been the cause of intense debate within Church circles. According to Charles Curran (1996, p 111), a diocesan Catholic priest and moral theologian, a large number of Catholic theologians disagree with official Catholic teachings on these issues of sexual morality. Perhaps the most controversial of these ‘pelvic issues’ is that of homosexuality.

This essay will examine the traditional Catholic standpoint on the issue of homosexuality as well as the postmodern challenge presented by those studying “gay and lesbian theology.” It will examine how the traditional views on homosexuality within the Catholic Church have come about and the circumstances which propagated this viewpoint. Furthermore, this essay will seek to discuss the postmodern changes proposed by theologians of “gay and lesbian theology” in light of the developments in the social, psychological, scientific and theological understandings of the issue. An exploration of the possible advantages of these proposed changes will also be included in this essay. Finally, this essay will attempt to discuss the steps the Catholic Magisterium would have to take in order to create a theology which accepts and includes LGBT people.

St. Joseph’s Parish, Newtown

St. Joseph’s Parish is a Roman Catholic Church based in Newtown – a suburb in Sydney’s Inner West known as a “gay district” (Ruting 2008, p 263). It is home to Acceptance -an LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) ministry for Catholics who wish to reconcile their faith and sexuality. Acceptance provides a means for LGBT Catholics to further develop their faith and understanding of themselves and God and create links with other LGBT Catholics. It also seeks to assist the wider Catholic community in developing its understanding of homosexuality and the issues which affect the lives of LGBT people (Acceptance Sydney Inc. 2009). This ministry and the support of the parish in attempting to live out the implications of an adherence to “gay and lesbian theology” in practice, provide a background for the issues explored in this essay.

Upon a Rock: the traditional Catholic interpretation of homosexuality

Tradition is a major part of what dictates and creates Catholic catechesis and theology. It is one part of a triad of ‘considerations’ utilized by the Catholic Church in the creation of Church teaching, the other two being Scripture and Magisterium. At its core, tradition is ‘something that is passed down from generation to generation. Shils (1981, p 12) notes that it is “anything which is handed down or transmitted from past to present.” According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, it refers to teachings which have been handed down from the apostles, whether orally or in writing, and have been

“continued through apostolic succession” (Libreria Editrice Vaticana n.d., para. 76-77). In the case of homosexuality, it is the passing down of interpretations of Scripture and teachings which have resulted in the creation and maintenance of premodern catechesis.

The Catholic Magisterium (the body entrusted with the role of the “authentic interpretation of the Word of God” (Libreria Editrice Vaticana n.d. para. 85)), currently holds an undoubtedly traditional standpoint on the issue of homosexuality. This standpoint is one based mainly on ancient interpretations and without regard to the “ferment of new knowledge” that society now possesses regarding the issue (Shinnick 1997, p 3), which includes the development of society’s understanding of the social, scientific and psychological issues surrounding homosexuality. It is an interpretation taken from a time when homosexuality was not understood and did not exist as a ‘sexuality,’ per se, leading to the development of a teaching that discounts anything other than heterosexuality as being ‘disordered.’ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* officially states that:

Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.” They are contrary to natural law.... The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies are not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for them a trial. (Libreria Editrice Vaticana n.d., para. 2357-2358)

Magisterial teaching develops this in its *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (also referred to as the *1986 Letter*), which states that:

[Homosexual acts] were described as deprived of their essential and indispensable finality, as being “intrinsically disordered,” as able in no case to be approved of. In the discussion which followed the publication of the Declaration, however, 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 more or less a strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder... (Bovone and Ratzinger 1986, Art. 3).

In essence, the Catholic Church’s current teaching sees “the homosexual condition” as one which is disordered, unnatural and with a limited role in the overall purpose of God. Curran (1996, p 141-142), Alison (2005) and Shinnick (1997, p 2) agree that the Church’s teachings portray this message to its adherents. Alison (2010, p 50) likens Catholic teachings on homosexuality to Catholic LGBT people being told to “sing... one of Zion’s songs,” but at the same time being told that “any song you could possibly sing couldn’t really be a song of Zion.”

These teachings are derived from theological interpretations of various biblical verses passed down through the ages and enshrined in catechesis by magisterial authorities in official releases such as those cited above. These interpretations, according to Spong (2005, pp 113-135) and Stone (2009, pp 19-38) are based on a number of scriptural texts known as ‘clobber verses’ (so called because they are used by fundamentalists to ‘clobber’ LGBT people), ranging from the story of Sodom (Gen 18:16-20) and Leviticus (Lev 18:22 and Lev 20:13) in the Old Testament to the Pauline Letters,

specifically Paul's letters to Corinthians (1 Cor 6:9-11) and the Romans (Rom 1:26-27) in the New Testament. These scriptural passages which refer in one way or another to 'men having sex with men' have been interpreted by the Catholic Magisterium as being outright condemnations of homosexuality and have been used by the Catholic Church to legitimize its position on the issue.

This hard-line stance by the Catholic Church has resulted in a sense of separation and rejection being felt by LGBT Catholics towards the Church and the Catholic culture in which many of them grew up. This standpoint has been described by Shinnick (1997, pp 4-6) as being judgemental, unjust and insensitive towards LGBT Catholics, as well as being deficient in catering for their spiritual lives. According to Alison (2008), it has resulted in LGBT Catholics being treated as "they" rather than "you" by the Church hierarchy, that is, as outsiders rather than insiders. Furthermore, Simon Rosser (cited in Shinnick 1997 p 2) notes that it has had "the main effect of alienating homosexuals from their religious tradition" and causing most LGBT people to "reject their religious background and identity." It has been made clear by a number of studies in regard to this issue that the negative depiction of homosexuality by the Catholic Church has had a negative impact on the people within it who identify as being LGBT (Shinnick 1997, p 122).

A Challenge to the Church: a postmodern approach to homosexuality

There are, however, LGBT members of the Catholic Church who have refused to reject their religious backgrounds and identities and have sought to reconcile their faith and sexuality. Some of these Catholics belong to the *Acceptance* ministry based in Newtown parish, while others are part of similar ministries such as *Quest* in the United Kingdom and *Dignity* in the United States. These people undertake this process of reconciliation through the use of reason, science and theology and have sought to create a "gay and lesbian theology." This theology, as developed by heterosexual and LGBT theologians alike, accepts the legitimacy of homosexuality as a gift from God and therefore, as a legitimate alternative to the official magisterial perspective (Shinnick 1997, p 135). Its adherents hope that this theology will eventually be recognized as official Catholic teaching, and that the Church will accept and legitimize the sexualities and personhoods of LGBT people.

This internal challenge to Catholic catechesis is a postmodern approach towards Catholic teachings on homosexuality. At its core, this challenge is a rejection of the totalizing 'truths' and 'stories' – "metanarratives" as Lyotard (1997, p 36) refers to them – that the Catholic hierarchy utilizes when referring to homosexuality. Postmodernism rejects the sense of complacency and self-confidence (Shils 1981, p 13) that the Catholic metanarratives hold, and seeks to challenge it through the use of modern means of gaining knowledge. In the words of Hardy (1999, p 30), "postmodernism is best conceived as a product of an application of principles of modern epistemology." Lyotard (1997, p 37-38) furthers this by noting that postmodern ideas are presupposed by metanarratives such as science and religion. This approach of constructing a theology that takes into account the traditions of the Catholic Church while incorporating the modern understanding of homosexuality is what these theologians call "gay and lesbian theology." This theology also takes into account the individual stories of LGBT people.

It may first be prudent to discuss the circumstances that have led to the creation of this so-called "gay and lesbian theology." Shinnick (1997, p 12-14) notes the increased

recognition of homosexuality and LGBT rights in society as being of utmost importance in this move. The development of the understanding society possesses on the science and psychology surrounding homosexuality has also assisted in the initiation of this new theology (Shinnick 1997, pp 100-107). The development of society's social understanding and acceptance of LGBT people has furthered the push for the development of this theology (Shinnick 1997, pp 121-122). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the insistence of LGBT Catholics, such as those at *Acceptance*, to be accounted for, heard and loved has forced theologians and the greater Catholic Church to acknowledge their needs (Shinnick 1997, pp 12-13; pp 119-121).

Because of these changes and developments within society, a challenge has been mounted against the metanarratives of the Catholic Magisterium. This challenge takes into account the metanarratives of science and Catholic tradition in the creation of an inclusive theology, knowing that "proposals to change the tradition are deadly serious" (Schoenherr 2002, p xxx). These challenges have occurred through dissent towards the official Magisterial interpretations on Scripture and Sacred Tradition by theologians of "gay and lesbian theology" and by groups such as *Acceptance*. Using these alternative interpretations, those who study "gay and lesbian theology" are able to create a postmodern Catholic approach to homosexuality which sees it as a God-given gift and as an aspect of human sexuality. It also allows for the creation of an inclusive and welcoming Church which appreciates and supports relationships between LGBT people as being based upon love and mutual friendships (Shinnick 1997, pp 135-137).

Theologians of "gay and lesbian theology" have proposed an alternative reading of the scriptural texts which have been used to condemn homosexuality. This alternative reading proposes a more contextual interpretation of the so-called 'clobber verses,' as recommended by *Dei Verbum* (Paul VI 1965a, n 12). This reading notes that homosexuality, as an orientation and way of 'loving,' was a foreign concept in biblical times (Thorp 1992 p 54). This suggests that, contextually, these acts of intercourse between two people of the same gender had no relationship to love and were in fact abusive relationships. Because of this, a more contextual reading would suggest that the condemnations present in biblical texts do not refer to the "modern" sense of homosexuality and that a scriptural teaching on the issue did not in fact exist. This leaves room for "gay and lesbian theology" to create a new theology which applies more pertinent aspects of the Gospel such as the love and mutual friendship to those who experience same-sex attraction in the new context of modern society.

Furthermore, an alternative interpretation of Sacred Tradition and Magisterial statements has also been offered by theologians of "gay and lesbian theology." Curran (1996, pp 146-155) claims that various Vatican documents provide both room and ammunition for the creation of a 'new' theology that is both contrary to the Church's current traditional teachings and that accepts the normalcy of homosexuality. For example, Curran notes that the *1986 Letter's* (Bovone and Ratzinger 1986) emphasis on the role of human reason (Art 2), the natural sciences (Art 2), the critical interpretation of Scriptural texts (Arts 4-5) and the role of the Church's living Tradition and Magisterium (Art 5) in the creation of catechesis gives weight to the revision of current teachings. *Gaudium et Spes* (Paul VI 1965b, n 14) adds further weight to this viewpoint by emphasizing the non-duality of persons, and thus the goodness of 'bodily' sexuality, including homosexuality. Curran (1996, p 155) notes that the proper use of these tools allows for – and in fact, "supports" – a revision of the Church's interpretation of homosexuality. In this way, theologians of "gay and lesbian theology" present a case that uses the Church's own tradition, rather than contravenes it, as a means of forming

its case for a change in Catholic catechesis and a rethinking of Catholic theology which is properly presupposed by science, reasoning and the Church's own traditions.

Into Uncharted Waters

At St Joseph's Church and other similar churches internationally, a tide for change is being created by those who work with and acknowledge the importance of God's gift of homosexuality. This tide is taking Catholic theology into uncharted waters. It is pushing for the greater Catholic Church and the Catholic Magisterium to acknowledge the importance and value of the LGBT person. Such has massive implications for Catholic LGBT people around the world in regards to their feelings of wellbeing, self-worth and acceptance. However, it is also a frightening and difficult thought for the Catholic Magisterium to both accept and apply. This, however, does provide some hope for the acceptance of "gay and lesbian theology" by the greater Catholic Church.

The acceptance of the legitimacy of "gay and lesbian theology" would have a major effect upon the lives of LGBT people. According to Shinnick (1997, pp 135-137) the acceptance of the flaws of the current metanarratives on homosexuality and the revision of catechesis would have the effect of having homosexuality accepted as a legitimate and God-given gift and a normal part of human sexuality. It would also allow for the creation of a sexual ethic based on justice and friendship. Support, rather than condemnation will also be given for all LGBT members of the Catholics Church. Finally, it would allow for the honouring and blessing of same-sex unions by the Church community.

For LGBT people, this change would perhaps result in the betterment of mental health, particularly for youth. It may result in greater levels of self-acceptance for who they are and who God wants them to be. The US Department of Health (cited in Shinnick 1997, p 122) notes that a change in the theological standpoint of religions in regards to homosexuality may reduce levels of suicide with LGBT youth. An overall improvement in the levels of self-esteem and sense of worth may come about due to the changes in catechesis which would move from the Church's current teaching of homosexuality as 'disordered' to homosexuality as a gift from God.

Furthermore, a change could occur in that the wider Church community, both clergy and laity, would begin to accept LGBT people as "insiders" rather than "outsiders," as "you" rather than "them" (Alison 2008). This would come about due to removal of the stigma of 'disorder' and 'pathology' that is often associated with the traditional Catholic teaching (Alison 2007). This potential change would result in LGBT Catholics again feeling part of the Church which has condemned them and their sexualities for so long. It could also further reaffirm to LGBT Catholics who were at risk of straying from the Church that they themselves were loved by God and his representatives on earth.

Despite these potential benefits of changing the Church's current standpoint and revising its metanarratives on homosexuality, there are still large hurdles for the Catholic Magisterium to overcome before change does occur. Alison (2009c) notes that the Church must firstly move away from its pre-modern understanding on the issue and take into account modern science and psychology's findings. This would allow for further discussion on the issue, as it would invalidate the Church's view that homosexuality is 'disordered.' Though steps have begun in the Anglophonic world to redress this issue to some extent (see Schnurr 1997; Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales 2012, which both refer to the unchangeable nature of

homosexuality), the Magisterium is yet to officially accept these findings. As such, most Church circles internationally still maintain the Church's pre-modern viewpoint.

Alison (2009b) further notes that the Church must move to understand the 'scandal' (*skandalon* or stumbling block) of same-sex attraction. That is, if things are to change, it must understand that the desires to love and the prohibition to love, which are both ingrained into people experiencing permanent same-sex attraction, can have negative effects upon these individuals. This is because, as Alison (2007) points out, they are often taught to "religiously distrust their feelings." As such, Alison (2007) suggests a revision in catechesis away from the current "moonshot model" which, using his analogy, calls on LGBT individuals to shoot a rocket at the moon saying "I believe, I believe, I believe." He recommends that it move instead towards a viewpoint whereby the 'certainty' of same-sex attraction is acknowledged by the Church and the 'extra' scandal of same-sex attraction (that is, the prohibition to love) is removed. This model acknowledges the potential faults of the Church's metanarratives regarding homosexuality and proposes something new and postmodern which takes into account the stories of the individual.

Finally, the Catholic Church must find in itself the capacity to initiate, maintain and broaden dialogue in regards to this issue. Shinnick (1997, p 3) notes that "the Vatican [has been] shutting people up, and shutting people out" in the discussion about homosexuality. Numerous people, including Charles Curran and John McNeill, have been removed from posts for speaking in favour of "gay and lesbian theology." Others, including St Joseph's Church and Acceptance, have been denigrated by conservative commentators due to their support of LGBT people (see *Old Sins in NewTown 2012*). Shinnick (1997, p 8) notes that it is only through dialogue that such changes could occur, and he nominates this as the most important factor in changing Magisterial teachings on the issue. This dialogue must include not only theological and Scriptural expertise on the issue, but also the accounts of LGBT Catholics who have experienced self-loathing, confusion and discrimination at the hands of the Catholic Church. It is these people who had previously been lost, confused and forgotten that the Church should reach out to. It is only through dialogue that the Church with both the theologians of "gay and lesbian theology" and the gay and lesbian people themselves that the Church will truly be able to minister effectively to the needs of LGBT people.

The hope for change exists. Curran (1996, p 146) references 'Rynne's Law' in noting that the Church's current "staunch and forceful refusal" to acknowledge change will inevitably result in its occurrence. Shinnick (1997, pp 131-132) sees much hope in recent Magisterial releases on the issue. But until then, the adherents of this "gay and lesbian theology" -especially LGBT people themselves - await the day when, as Lyotard (cited in Malpas 2005, p 31) describes it, what is now postmodern will become part of the modern Church.

Notes on Contributor

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