

On the horns of a dilemma: Catholic teaching on homosexuality

By Richard Rohr, O.F.M.

"Avoiding the risk of a transgression has become more important to us (on either side) than carrying a difficult position for God. And it is this that is killing us."

—Fr. Teilhard de Chardin, S.J.

In our last issue of *Radical Grace* we had an article presenting some of the new Scripture interpretations on the complex and divisive issue of homosexuality. We are grateful to Ellen Griegby, a Protestant friend, for taking the risk and also taking the criticism that came from some corners. We know that she is a very faithful disciple of Jesus and is also speaking out of her truest faith experience and some very reputable scholarship. It helped many people, but also disturbed others, because they thought she was promoting homosexuality (as if you really could!). I believe her concerns are much deeper and more honest than that. She is living on the horns of a dilemma that I will try to describe simply, and I hope fairly.

Some have asked if I could write a parallel piece that would try to present the difficult position seemingly held and taught by the Catholic Catechism. If I can do this, I think it would be an example of what we try to live here at the Center, and which we call "the third way." This is not head-on confrontation with difficult positions, nor is it running from them either. It is neither flight nor flight, but the scary third way of the Gospel, a narrow path that "few take," according to Jesus. However poorly, I would like to try to present the official teaching of the Catholic Church, and be honest about the many needed values that the Catholic teaching is trying to preserve—even if you might disagree with the manner or the workings or the assumptions. Let's all try to raise above our hurts, egos, sometimes self-serving moralities and unnecessary turf battles, and see what common ground we can find here. Sometimes gifts come in wrapping paper that we do not like, but we can still open it for the good gift that is inside. In this case, I believe the gift is worth searching for and worth waiting for.

Our concern here at the CAC is always primarily pastoral and spiritual. How can we use all situations to lead people to deeper union with God, with themselves, and with Reality? That seems to be God's concern to such a degree in the Bible that God even uses people's mistakes and sins to draw them into Union. As I told the Archbishop recently, my beginning place is growth in "faith and not the law. Neither is the law always my guiding place, but that when I do not know what to do, I listen to the law, learn from it, and respect it. As Paul tells us in Romans, "Do we mean that faith makes the law pointless? Not at all; we are giving the law its true value" (Romans 3:31). The law gives information but cannot of itself provide transformation. That is the work of grace and sometimes terrifying faith journeys. But the law seems to be the necessary beginning place, precisely so that we can struggle with its core values and find the law's true meaning. At the risk of losing some of you, I quote the Dalai Lama who says, "You must learn the law very well, so you will know how to disobey it properly." Paul says the same in a very convoluted way, and it takes him the whole book of Romans to do it. The point, of course, is not disobedience but true, faithful, and intelligent obedience. Loving the Lord with mind, heart, and soul, to quote Jesus.

Many today are not willing to do this spiritual work. And it is work! Both on the right and the left of issues, we want answers, but not the spiritual combat that produces saints and prophets. Jesus illustrates this third way in much of the fifth chapter of Matthew's Gospel. He begins six times with the same recurring line, "You have learned how it was said to your ancestors," and then adds his own interpretation "but I say to you." In each case the perfectly orthodox position is presented. He does not disagree with it, but then says what he thinks it really means. The final call and effect is considerably different, and actually more demanding. So while he looks like he is dismissing the law, he actually repositions it on a new and stronger foundation. He calls pure legal observance, "virtue that goes deeper than the scribes and Pharisees" (Matthew 5:20). Yet the recurring and constant hostility he receives in the rest of the Gospel shows that he has pleased hardly anyone. Only the sinners and the loving disciples seem to get his point. All others fight him for "rejecting the traditions of our ancestors" (Matthew 15:2). Jesus is clearly not considered "orthodox" by his religious establishment, although the word orthodox is not a Scriptural word.

Let's look at the present teaching of the Catholic Tradition on homosexuality and see both the deep human and spiritual values it is trying to preserve—and the workable tension that is called forth from this teaching. In that sense, it is a perfectly Biblical text. The appropriate passages are numbers 2357, 2358, and 2359 of the Catholic Catechism. Take note of both what it says and what it does not say, and try to hear the Holy Spirit guiding your own formation of conscience—and a sense of right and true relationship (which, by the way, is another word for chastity).

#2357 "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 Scripture, which presents homosexuality as acts of grave depravity (Genesis 19:1-29, Romans 1:24-27, 1 Cor. 6:10, and 1 Timothy 1:10) tradition has always declared that 'homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered' (Persona Humana, 8). 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."

Before you get angry or react too quickly, notice the admission of recent scholarship that is affirmed here. Notice also that these Scripture quotes are precisely the ones that Ellen Griegby would have been referring to in her article in the last issue.

We will not argue for or against them here. But notice that the Catechism does not attribute homosexuality to a perverse or malicious decision on the part of the person. It also admits that it exists, and it is found through the centuries and in many forms and cultures. It does not claim to know the origin of such behavior, but leaves that to other disciplines. This is a great advance in thinking on the part of almost all historical religions, and most importantly does not leave any room for judgment of the person himself or herself. It only judges the act. With clinical precision, it separates the act from the person, protecting the person as person, even if this separation is much harder to do for most people. But we must be honest, and admit that this is a significant development of thought and spirituality.

One must know that the linchpin of all Catholic sexual morality is the underlying premise that the purpose and goal of all sexual activity is procreation or "the gift of life." Once you accept this, all other positions follow directly from its teachings on birth control, masturbation, pornography, premarital sex, and homosexuality. It is perfectly consistent teaching, and sees as its goal the preservation of the institution of marriage for the sake of society, the woman who is usually the most victimized without marriage, the whole family unit, and of course children. When we see what is happening in Western cultures as the bond of marriage weakens and almost collapses, we cannot be too glib about dismissing this as a supreme value. The social disintegration that is upon us is producing a very high number of unhealthy, neurotic, narcissistic, promiscuous and antisocial people. The indissolubility and faithfulness of the marriage bond, the ideal of heterosexual marriage, must clearly be the norm for the sake of the common good. To me, that is self-evident. (But don't be too quick to draw unnecessary conclusions from that. Remember, Jesus himself was not in such a marriage relationship! Preserving the norm does not eliminate the exceptions to the norm. For some reason, our Western dualistic mind has a problem with that, even though all of nature, biology, and now quantum physics is filled with what we thought were norms and constantly appearing exceptions to the norm).

Family values are indeed values for both religion and society, and the partnership of male and female is rightly seen as foundational to the whole family system. All of us came from such unions. It is a prime and central value. From this perspective, such teaching would rightly be called "natural law." Anything else appears very unnatural and even dangerous for society. Male and female is seen as the "natural complementarity," and even the psychologist C.G. Jung would agree with this archetypal pattern. The only trouble is that he and many contemporary would now localize the male and female energies WITHIN each person and not exclusively in the opposite genders. This changes the whole framework for many thinkers and modern people, and here the Church itself must be patient, humble, and understanding. These are not bad-willed people, but simply people with a sincere but alternative worldview and alternative anthropology. It sets us up for conflicting opinions and conclusions—among very good-willed people on both sides. Every mainline Christian church and even Eastern religions find themselves di-

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vided over this issue today. We are being positioned on the horns of an immense contemporary dilemma. No surprise to me that the foundational archetypes of male and female would be the ones that carry such deep meaning, energy, feeling, and opinions. Above everything else, male and female seems to define our psyches and our culture—and we are rightfully afraid to tamper in this sacred realm.

Yet we must allow the Catholic Tradition to teach its own anthropology of the human person, just as each of us wants to "teach ours." Seems fair to me. The rub, of course, and finally the source of anger and rebellion for many people is that the church says it has "the truth," or the true description of the human person, and the authority to teach that truth. We had best not be too quick to dismiss such claims out of hand. Yet the Church itself must bear at least some of the blame for the immense dysfunction that we find in countries that were evangelized by this Western view of the person. Did it not justify slavery and exploitation of peoples and "the sin of sexism" until very recent years with this anthropology? In my well-traveled opinion, sexual morality seems to be most out of control in precisely Christian countries, as opposed to Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu cultures. Strange, isn't it? One could say with some great degree of honesty that our Catholic and Christian teaching has not "worked" for many, many people. Both of us, Church and secular culture, homosexual and heterosexual, have plenty of reasons for humility and patience and apology.

#2358 "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. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God's will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter in their condition."

Again, I am impressed. This is not typical of religious traditions. Muslim or Buddhist cultures would not be so compassionate or protective of the individual in their analysis of this issue. The text clearly warns against discrimination and teaches "acceptance, respect, compassion and sensitivity." It took us thousands of years to get to this freedom. We should rejoice! As Andrew Sullivan points out, this passage makes a huge historical leap when it definitively teaches "they do not choose their homosexual condition." He and others would say that this therefore changes the very meaning of the term "natural." What is natural if perhaps God creates homosexuals? This is the Achilles heel of the Catholic opinion for many contemporary thinkers. Yes, we are only held more firmly on the horns of the dilemma, but we must be sincerely grateful that the Church has brought its

immense authority to advance this thorny question. When the Church finally says it, we know they have covered all of their necessarily conservative bases. That makes it rock solid: "Peter," as it were!

I think the Church is being both consistent and sincere in counseling the homosexual person about the wisdom of the Paschal Mystery that we come to life only through death. It has taught the same to the heterosexual marriage contract, and has the right and responsibility to say the same to the homosexual. This doctrine of the cross, I believe, is the most realistic, the most liberating, the most honest, and yet the hardest of all the Church's proclamations. (q.v. *Everyday Living*, pp.151-155). All of us from top to bottom, it seems to me, are trying to be transformed WITHOUT suffering, humiliation, and failure—the cross. If homosexual persons saw the whole Church, from Popes to Bishops to priests to laity, sincerely choosing the way of solidarity with suffering and poverty, I think they would find our doctrine of the cross much more credible. Naturally, it appears to be trotted out for "those others." Nevertheless, the Paschal Mystery is still true for the homosexual, as for all members of the Body, and the church is right to reassert it here.

In the practical order, we have lost the authority to teach the cross to others, when our own lives appear to be surrounded with the seeking of perk, privilege, power, and position. Here the Church must recognize that it appears to many people to be disingenuous. It is no longer enough to just have the truth, but you must have the credibility to make that truth believable. As Pope Paul VI rightly said, "the world will no longer believe teachers unless they are first of all wit-

nesses." Similarly, the homosexual and the secular liberationist must also gain the authority and credibility to teach their "doctrine." It does not have any proven track record at all.

But for all of us—the secular person, the homosexual person and church persons—we must all be initiated into the redemptive power of sacrificial love. It will, and always has, saved the world. But which of us really believes it or lives it?

#2359 "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."

Who can argue with this if you understand it maturely? It is good advice for everyone. (The only concern I would have is that this word "perfection" is a word that only applies to God and to mathematicians. It is not as such a Biblical concept, and tends to set people up for denial, failure, or delusion.) I would also assume that the heterosexual person is similarly called to chastity in regard to everyone else except their married partner, and even in that relationship, there are ways of relating that respect the body and the humanity of the other person and ways that do not. It is possible to be "unchaste" inside of marriage itself. I am not sure, however, what the Catechism means by "disinterested" friendship? It would appear to be an oxymoron. I suspect they wanted to say "non-sexual," but were afraid and used a clumsy euphemism. Friendship is inherently "interested," but I will accept their intended point. There are other kinds of support than sexual relationship.

Without wanting to take sides here on this immensely divisive issue, one must admit that the mainline Christian position held by most of the churches against same sex marriage, with the exception of the United Church of Christ, creates a situation that in effect encourages the very promiscuity that it rightly condemns. This is a major dilemma and problem that the Church must be honest about. We leave the homosexual person very lonely and undefended by social structures and by the church itself, which quotes God in Genesis "it is not good for man to be alone. Yet I can also understand the fear in society that homosexual partnership would compete with the normative character of heterosexual marriage. Again the dilemma.

The Catholic theology of charisms, always described them as "free gifts." Total chastity is called the "charism" of celibacy. We are suddenly in the strange position of "mandating a free gift." This would appear to be a contradiction in terms. You cannot order someone to have a charism. That is not said rebelliously nor is it an attempt to "promote" anything. Reality just does not work that way, and reality itself has always been the greatest ally of God. Good Catholic theology has always prided itself on making use of both faith and reason, as opposed to those "poor fundamentalists" whom we thought relied far too uncritically on "sola Scriptura." Catholic homosexual morality is finding itself torn between these two fonts of the Tradition. Our Church cannot have it both ways: quoting Scripture when we want, and then using natural law and reason when we want. Catholic theology taught that faith and reason must inform and correct one another. Homosexual morality is going to be a major testing ground for that theology.

We need something more than momentary political convenience or anger or reaction if we are going to build something that will last and free people for generations to come. That is the solid and finally public work of the Church. The trouble is that each of us only lives in one generation, and the Church tries to overcome this curricular. It is hard to be Roman Catholic or catholic in any sense. But that does not mean you have to arrogantly throw out Church positions that do not totally agree with you. I am convinced there is no pure pedestal on which to stand. Learn from the process itself, listen to the Sources, grow with history, suffer its broken reality, enjoy the partial or full truth that is always there, bless God for God's patience and even new mercy with us—and from that place you can forge a positive future. You will be wise, and not just right. You will be just in the largest sense. You will be incarnate like Jesus, and not just orthodox (the temptation of the right) or politically correct (the temptation of the left). We need a new model for revolution and reformations: the old way of fight or flight has not served us well. The third way agrees to honor the past, the future and the present pain that is always on both sides, and not just get stuck in the cultural and reactionary now. I admit that takes a lot of perspective and a lot of faith and a lot of patience.

So there you sit now, like poor job on the dung heap. Let God teach you how to hold the tension and hold out for a larger and longer lasting truth. If you are honest, you are now firmly squirming on the horns of the homosexual dilemma, and I have not shown you a way off of those horns on either side. If it feels a little like the cross of Jesus, maybe it is. If it feels like Buddha's "Great Compassion," you are right. If it feels like the darkness of faith, most of us have not been taught how to live there.

We have been trained to think that we must release the pain and anxiety immediately—find an answer, affirm our righteousness, prove why WE are going to heaven and WHO is going to hell. Who ever said that was even the goal? Jesus just told us to follow him. Do you know how many of the 183 direct or indirect questions that Jesus was asked in the four Gospels he actually answered? Three! Yes, three, check it out. He did not free us from hearing the mystery of being human. He led us right into that mystery—and he hung there himself. From there, and I believe profoundly there, the Spirit is released (John 19:30). "The Spirit that will lead us to complete truth" (John 16:13), and who alone is Truth. From the "coincidence of opposites" that is the cross, you are in a position to love God, love your neighbor, love truth, the painful process of getting to truth, and even love this pilgrim Church and our struggling history. Can't beat that! Jesus says, this greatest commandment "includes the whole law and the prophets" and "is far more important than any holocaust or sacrifice."

This same passage on the greatest commandment ends with the scribes reluctantly submitting to this terrible spiritual tension. It cryptically says, "and no one dared to ask him any more questions" (Mark 12:34). You can feel the anxiety and doubt in the very text, just as we also feel it in our own hearts. But now God can lead—because we are finally out of the way. Faith is, and always has been, darkness more than light. But it is a luminous darkness, and just enough to keep walking.

Richard Rohr is a Franciscan priest, and a founding director of the Center for Action and Contemplation. He is a regular teacher and animator of the Center's spirituality. He also spends much of his time teaching and serving as a consultant with a variety of groups nationally and internationally.

The Religious Declaration is a consensus statement created by theologians and ethicists from a broad range of religious traditions and currently endorsed by over 2000 religious leaders across the United States, including denominational leaders, seminary presidents, deans, and faculty members, and clergy from more than twenty-five religious traditions, including the Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Roman Catholic Church, United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), American Baptist Churches, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Unitarian Universalist Association, and the Reform and Reconstructionist movements in Judaism.

Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing

Sexuality is God's life-giving and life-fulfilling gift. We come from diverse religious communities to recognize sexuality as central to our humanity and as integral to our spirituality. We are speaking out against the pain, brokenness, oppression, and loss of meaning that many experience about their sexuality.

Our faith traditions celebrate the goodness of creation, including our bodies and our sexuality. We sin when this sacred gift is abused or exploited. However, the great promise of our traditions is love, healing, and restored relationships.

Our culture needs a sexual ethic focused on personal relationships and social justice rather than particular sexual acts. All persons have the right and responsibility to lead sexual lives that express love, justice, mutuality, commitment, consent, and pleasure. Grounded in respect for the body and for the vulnerability that intimacy brings, this ethic fosters physical, emotional, and spiritual health. It accepts no double standards and applies to all persons, without regard to sex, gender, color, age, bodily condition, marital status, or sexual orientation.

God hears the cries of those who suffer from the failure of religious communities to address sexuality. We are called today to see, hear, and respond to the suffering caused by violence against women and sexual minorities, the HIV pandemic, unsustainable population growth and over-consumption, and the commercial exploitation of sexuality.

Faith communities must therefore be truth seeking, courageous, and just. We call for:

- Theological reflection that integrates the wisdom of excluded, often silenced peoples, and insights about sexuality from medicine, social science, the arts and humanities.
- Full inclusion of women and sexual minorities in congregational life, including their ordination and the blessing of same sex unions.
- Sexuality counseling and education throughout the lifespan from trained religious leaders.
- Support for those who challenge sexual oppression and who work for justice within their congregations and denomination.

Faith communities must also advocate for sexual and spiritual wholeness in society. We call for:

- Lifelong, age appropriate sexuality education in schools, seminaries, and community settings.
- A faith-based commitment to sexual and reproductive rights.
- Religious leadership in movements to end sexual and social injustice.

God rejoices when we celebrate our sexuality with holiness and integrity. We, the undersigned, invite our colleagues and faith communities to join us in promoting sexual morality, justice, and healing.

For the most recent list of signers, check www.religionproject.org