

August 1971

The Pastoral Implications of Church Teaching on Homosexuality

John F. Harvey

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

Recommended Citation

Harvey, John F. (1971) "The Pastoral Implications of Church Teaching on Homosexuality," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 38 : No. 3 , Article 10.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol38/iss3/10>

The Pastoral Implications of Church Teaching on Homosexuality

John F. Harvey, O.S.F.S.



Father Harvey was ordained June 3, 1944. He is presently President of De Sales Hall School of Theology, Washington, D.C. He has numerous publications on the subject of homosexuality. He belongs to the following professional organizations: Catholic Theological Society of America, Mariological Society of America, College Theology Society, Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, American Society of Christian Ethics.

During the November 1970 workshop on homosexuality and religion held at the Catholic University the question was presented to me whether I would give absolution in the confessional to a homosexual who had every intention of remain[†]ing a homosexual liaison, or what is sometimes called a homosexual "marriage." The interrogator added that this homosexual did not feel that he was doing wrong in such an overt practice of homosexuality, because he knew of no other way to have a stable human friendship, and did not want to lapse into the promiscuous kind of life so characteristic of many homosexuals.

I replied that in conscience I could not give absolution to this individual, unless he agreed to give up this practice because I regarded such a way of living as a serious violation of the Christian norms of sexual conduct. To this reply it was objected that I had overlooked the fact that the individual

did not regard his behavior as contrary to the law of God. I responded to this objection with further observations. If this person *really* believed that his conduct was not sinful, he had no solid reason to present it in the confessional. The fact of presentation of his homosexual actions indicates that he expects the confessor to respond with approval or disapproval. Granting, however, for the sake of discussion that a given individual really HAD BEEN in good faith about the serious gravity of this matter until the time of his confession, he has an obligation to accept the advice of the confessor on the immorality of his past conduct in this issue and to take whatever steps are necessary to free himself from such a homosexual union. It is *theoretically* possible that this individual has not been aware of the immorality of his conduct before confession, but such ignorance does not free him from the obligation of following what has been the common teaching of moralists on this subject. However *emphatically* the confessor may be to the subjective difficulties of the homosexual penitent, he is not free to give approval for the continuation of the homosexual liaison. Since he exercises the power of forgiving or retaining sins in the name of the Church, he is bound to follow solid moral teaching both in instructing the penitent and in demanding that the penitent change his way of life.

My arguments were further challenged by another moral theologian who claimed that I was mistaken about the nature of the judgement made by the priest in the confessional. Penance was not the "legalistic" judgement which I had described, but an act of mercy in which Christ brings pardon and peace to the sinner. To refuse him absolution would be to pass a judgement of condemnation on him

and to exclude him from the sacraments. The priest should absolve this person.

To this challenge — supported by others in the audience — I could do no more than point out that there was a serious difference of opinion between two moralists on the confessional approach to the overt homosexual. I decided to develop the controversy at a later date, and in this article I will submit my views on the matter.

The first question is whether two men living together in overt homosexuality are following the law of God with its prescriptions for the right use of sexual love and faculties. Holy Scripture in Genesis 1-2 and again in Ephesians, 5, indicates that the ideal of sexual love is found in an enduring life together of man and woman called marriage, in which personal love is at the same time procreative. The Scriptures speak of woman as the helpmate of man, and of man leaving parents to cling to his wife, so that they become one flesh, out of which proceeds offspring. Apart from philosophic reasoning on the matter, both Old Testament and New stress the personal and procreative values of marital union — with the procreative good having the edge.¹ While Ephesians 5 alone is not used to demonstrate that marriage is a sacrament, it does indicate its sacred nature by comparing the bridegroom with Christ and the bride with the Church. Christ loves his Church in the way in which a man loves his wife and desires that she remain unblemished and beautiful. Ephesians 5, like Genesis 1-2, and Tobias, teaches the holiness of heterosexual activity within the bond of marriage. On the other hand, nowhere in Holy Scripture is any kind of homosexual union approved or condoned; and in several places it is explicitly condemned.²

While individual passages condemning homosexual practices have probative value, the better argument is the overall orientation of both Old Testament and New to present heterosexual marriage as the institution within which man's sexual powers may have most perfect fulfillment.³ All these passages from Holy Scripture should be understood in conjunction with arguments from human reason and experience. To understand the purely human arguments against homosexuality it is necessary to explore a few speculative points about the basic purpose of man's sexual nature. The traditional school of thought has regarded the use of the sexual faculties as both personal and procreative. The act of sexual intercourse between man and wife need not lead in every instance to procreation, but it should not be deprived of its procreative power. Some who would oppose the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* because of its *absolute* prohibition of contraception in marriage would still insist that the acts of marriage have a procreative value as well as a personal value in perfecting a man and a woman.⁴ A comparatively new school of thought holds that one can separate completely the procreative value of sexual union in marriage from many other nonprocreative values of sexual union, which run the spectrum from normal heterosexual intercourse through the various deviations of heterosexual acts and through the various forms of homosexual acts to acts of bestiality. The basic principle of this new norm of sexuality is that sexual acts may be used in any self-fulfilling way, provided that no injury is done to the neighbor.⁵

Now no demonstration is needed to show that a homosexual act precludes all possibility of transmission of life. It

can be justified only by abandoning the traditional understanding of the purpose of sexual acts in favor of a theory which looks primarily, if not exclusively, to the fulfillment of personal values as the moral norm of sexual conduct.

In light of the traditional view of sex and marriage I hold that homosexual acts are an inordinate use of the sexual faculties. Inordinate, not only because opposed to the procreative purpose of sexual activity, but also to the heterosexual purpose of sexual activity, namely, an act of mutual love between a man and a woman in marriage — a point already made in the Scriptures. Since, moreover, homosexual acts run contrary to very important purposes of sexual activity, they are a grave transgression of the divine will.

The procreation and education of children within the institution of marriage is a very important goal of human sexuality; but homosexual acts render this goal impossible; therefore they are a grave violation of the divine will, because the more important the goal, the more serious is the violation of that goal.

An additional argument is that homosexual acts are a deviation from the usual attraction of man for woman which leads to the foundation of the basic unit of society, the family. This line of reasoning, as well as the previous argumentation, will not be accepted by many homosexuals who believe that "natural" has a different meaning for homosexuals than it does for heterosexuals. In any case, the combined weight of both Scriptural teaching and human reasoning leads to a solidly established conclusion that within a Christian perspective homosexual acts are a privation of human sexuality and a grave moral evil in the *objective* order.

Father Charles Curran would not agree with this conclusion. He regards homosexual acts as *per se* wrong, and the homosexual as suffering from an aberration of the sexual instinct; but if it is clear that the homosexual tendency has developed to the stage where it is practically irreversible, he should be permitted some stable homosexual friendship as the lesser of two evils. He subsumes the plight of the homosexual under the compromise principle, by which one is excused from grave guilt because of the sinful situation in which the person must live. The homosexual is such a person.⁶

This compromise principle is not acceptable. Presupposing truly human acts, he will have the grace of God to avoid an action which is objectively evil. If the homosexual is also compulsive, then that is a separate problem which I have treated elsewhere.⁷ It seems that Curran's argument overlooks several realities on the level of psychology and of divine grace. On the level of grace his use of the compromise principle presupposes that the individual has no real chance of overcoming his desire for homosexual acts without losing his mental balance. For the homosexual continence would be morally impossible. On the level of psychology it also presupposes that the tendency towards homosexual acts is beyond any real chance of reversibility. I should like to respond to these presuppositions by introducing several distinctions and by suggesting other possibilities of helping the homosexual to remain chaste.

The first distinction is the difference between continence and chastity. "*Continence is physical abstention* — the fact itself of having no sexual relations. Chastity is an *attitude of mind* which rejects, both in act and in

thought, carnal pleasures forbidden by morality or religion. It is easy for a chaste person to be continent, but the reverse is not true. What is harmful is *not* chastity, but continence without chastity."⁸

The unchaste continent person cultivates by his imagination images and desires which by their erotic nature are preliminaries to carnal acts. Such bring about a state of nervous excitation in the genital region which often leads to masturbation. The person may believe that he did not provoke the masturbation, but the whole direction of his thoughts was toward sexual satisfaction. The situation gives rise to deep feelings of guilt, which in a circular way, increase the drive to masturbate. Such conduct is the open door to anxiety and obsessive and phobic neurosis, because the individual lacks insight into his own innermost desires and is going in contrary directions at one and the same time. He has not really willed chastity, although consciously he believes that he wants it. St. Augustine refers to this conflict when he said that the sickness of the human will does not rest in the conflicts between the flesh and the spirit, but in the battle between the spirit and the spirit.⁹ Such a person has not yet made up his mind to be chaste, and may be unaware of the fact that he has not yet made up his mind. On the other hand, the chaste person knows why he wants to be chaste. In his letter on *Holy Virginity* (1954, par. 12), Pius XII understands chastity as the complete and free renunciation of the use of the marital faculties with their concomitant pleasures for the love of Christ. No other motive on any lower level for the renunciation of sexual pleasure constitutes Christian chastity, although it may be a form of self control. Once a person knows why he wants to be chaste, he will take care

to avoid the occasions of unchastity. He will curb his curiosity and imagination with regard to morbid literary materials, cinema, and drama to the extent possible for any human. Chastity then is more a matter of preventing the kind of situation in which we have sexual temptations than it is in suppressing them.

Suppression, however, is a conscious and healthy process, because one rejects some form of sexual pleasure as contradictory to an already formulated commitment in terms of vow or promise; repression, on the other hand, is the unconscious rejection by a person of certain tendencies which religious or moral precepts tell him are reprehensible. This is self-bullying and neurosis-producing. If the reason for consciously rejecting a sexual temptation goes *beyond* the consideration of merely obeying a precept and satisfies the fulfillment of an ideal, then we are in the area of sublimation about which several additional distinctions should be made.¹⁰

In discussing homosexuality and the religious life I speculated that much latent homosexuality has its roots in an unhealthy form of sublimation. This kind of sublimation takes place in a sick and equivocal way. But there is another kind, which is free and adaptive. William F. Lynch holds that the second form is altogether different from the rigid type. Free sublimation has confronted the problem of the attachment of the libido (sexuality, love) to inappropriate or immature areas. It has released this energy and has made it ready for flexible application in any new direction, whether that be appropriate sexuality or work or any adult activity. It is free to meet

new situations on their own terms: "It is a free generalized energy or love or capacity for wishing that may be sexual, cultural, spiritual, friendly, interested, wishing, planning, according to all the needs and realities of human life."¹¹

This free form of sublimation can be sexualized or desexualized according to the decisions of conscious human beings. It moves forward into reality with interest and desire. It does not feel trapped by the commitment of a vow or promise, because this commitment does not exhaust its potentiality. It would seem then that the difference between free sublimation and rigid is the same as that between commitment and fixation.

A third factor in the development of a life of chastity is prayer. Dr. Massingbird Ford contends that a full virginal life demands a spirit of intense contemplation, in which the person strives for nothing less than transforming union. Each virgin is baptized into the Suffering Servant in the sense that one's gift to Christ carries with it a certain amount of human loneliness. Within a context of both solitariness and prayer such a person develops a deep interior life. In short, chastity is a way of life rather than an isolated virtue.

Significantly also, chastity must involve community. The monks of Taizé in their Chicago house insist that one night a week be kept open by all members for community living and mutual instruction. The point to be made is that a chaste person must multiply real relationships with at least a small number of people if he is to fulfill his ideal. Chastity is not meant to be loneliness, but aloneness with God, at least for some part of every

day. Paradoxically, as one veteran priest said during a recent workshop, consecrated chastity is a vocation to intimacy.¹² For these reasons I believe that a homosexual accepting and living a fully embraced chastity out of love for God and nourishing that life in prayer and community can sublimate freely homosexual tendencies. It is simply not true to hold that sublimation is *only* an unconscious process which cannot be the direct object of man's will.¹³ The opinion that sublimation is fixed and unconscious does not account for the opinions of clinicians who have discovered that well motivated individuals can practice a free form of sublimation *or* real chastity. As one veteran clinical psychologist expressed it to me recently: "Man's power to sublimate sexual tendencies is tremendous." Finally, in pastoral practice I have worked with men who have full knowledge of their homosexual tendencies, but know how to sublimate them.

To the notion that the homosexual tendency is beyond reversibility I can do no more than refer the reader to more recent studies which offer hope for some degree of ameliorization of their condition. By ameliorization I mean improvement in his psychological attitude toward himself — not necessarily reversal of sexual tendency — although this seems to be achieved in some cases. Using a variety of psychological approaches, therapists have found that the young homosexual who is strongly motivated to change his sexual orientation has an excellent chance of success. The same therapists report that they have been able to help between 25 and 50 percent of all homosexuals — apart from age and original motivation — to make a heterosexual adjustment. Growing numbers of dissatisfied male

homosexuals are seeking to change their sexual orientation or at least to make a better adjustment to it. To be sure, the vast majority of homosexuals are not interested in psychiatric treatment, but at least some have realized their hopes of change. In the face of these developments in therapy the pastoral counselor should not be too quick to advise an invert that he cannot change or to accept his overt homosexuality as an inevitable evil. Curran's theory of compromise does not apply.¹⁴

This brings us to the question asked at the homosexual workshop: Should the priest allow the homosexual to remain in good faith concerning the objectively grave evil of his acts? No. It is a disservice to him to allow him to remain in his present state of mind, as if he could not he his homosexual behavior. It is indeed ironic that some behavioral scientists seek to help the homosexual to transcend his sexual difficulties in a life of rational self-control, while clergy, both Catholic and Protestant, accept overt homosexual styles of life as perfectly justifiable.¹⁵ Edward Sagarin regards as myth the idea that a homosexual cannot be changed. He believes that their reiteration of the unchanging nature of their condition is a rationalization by which they hope to gain public approval for their way of life.

The next question whether the priest should give absolution to a homosexual who will not promise to take effective steps to avoid overt acts should also be answered in the negative. The very heart of sacramental penance from the penitent's point of view is *metanoia*, a radical change of heart and of mind with regard to past sin. The mercy of God is exercised primarily in giving the sinner the power to bring about this change of

heart. If there is no change of heart on the sinner's part, the absolution of the priest is not valid and sin remains. Most reluctantly, therefore, a priest should refuse absolution to a homosexual penitent who refuses to show any sign of repentance. This does not mean, however, that he condemns the homosexual, or presumes to judge infallibly the interior state of his soul. In the name of Christ and the Church he exercises his power to forgive sins provided the penitent is truly sorry for them. If he judges that the penitent is not sorry, he may not in conscience grant absolution. He leaves the door open for the penitent to come back. He urges him to reflect upon the matter; and to renew his sorrow for sin long before he can come to a confessional. Above all, he seeks to impart some hope to the homosexual.

The priest should help the homosexual to see that there is hope for him in the free sublimation of his sexual instincts and not in the allegedly "stable" homosexual relationship which, in many instances, truncates personality development. There is such a vast difference between marriage and a homosexual liaison that the term "marriage" should not be used to designate the latter. If a homosexual seeks to be creative in the sense of finding new opportunities to develop his powers of knowing reality and loving other humans, he will find it abundantly in a life of service to the many; and this life of service, in turn, will be supported by a spirit of chastity and prayer.

Again, why must the conversation about friendships among humans always get bogged down with the notion that such friends must express their love in a genital way? The chaste homosexual can form many fruitful friendships in his service of Christ

without allowing himself to become so deeply involved with anyone that he feels he must avoid his companionship. With the help of a confessor or spiritual guide he will be able to discern the signs of solid friendship as contrasted with infatuations. Works like C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, or St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, have much to tell him about diverse forms of human love and divine love. What the homosexual needs (and so do we all) is the sense that he is beloved by God and men, and can love in return. For some this involves genital expression in marriage; but for many love finds a vast variety of other expressions.

Some Conclusions: There is no solidly probable opinion in favor of allowing homosexuals to live together in some form of permanent overt relationship; the traditional teaching is that it is *objectively* grave matter and not an object of good faith; much more important is the need for all priests to realize their power to help the homosexual live a life of love in the service of Christ and the community.

REFERENCES

1. Pierre Grelot, *Man and Wife in Scripture* N.Y., Herder and Herder, 1964, gives abundant documentation on this point.
2. In the Old Testament: Lev. 18:2 and 20:13. In the New: Romans 1:26-27; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; and 1 Tim. 1:9-10. The most explicit passage is Romans: "For this cause God has given them up to shameful lusts; for their women have exchanged natural intercourse for what is against nature, and in the same way men too, having given up natural intercourse with women, have burned in their lusts towards one another, men with men practicing that well known shamelessness and receiving in their own persons the fitting punishment of their perversity." Notice the context in which the practice of homosexuality is

described. Because they had refused to worship the true God, God had given them up to the practice of unnatural vices. The passages from 1 Tim. and 1 Cor. also regard the sin of homosexuality as excluding one from the kingdom of God, that is, as a grave sin. An exhaustive treatment of the Scriptures on homosexuality is found in Derrick Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* London, Longmans, 1955.

3. Paul Ramsey, "A Christian Approach to the Question of Sexual Relations Outside of Marriage," *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 5, 100-118, stresses the norm of marital love as basis for moral evaluation of premarital intercourse.
4. Paul Ramsey, *Fabricated Man*, Yale, 1970, 32-39, develops the thesis that the norm of sexual acts is found in marital union . . . which preserves both values.
5. Michael F. Valente, *Sex: The Radical View of a Catholic Theologian*, N.Y., Bruce, 1970.
6. Contemporary Problems in Moral Theology, Fides, 1970, 176-177.
7. F. X. Cevetello, edit. *All Things to All Men* vol. 2. "The Pastoral Treatment of Compulsion in the Homosexual", 100-116. N.Y., Wagner, 1967.
8. "Letter to an Educator," 7-8 at 7; *New Problems in Medical Ethics*, vol. 1, 1952, Cork, Ireland.
9. John F. Harvey, O.S.F.S., *The Moral Theology of the Confessions of St. Augustine*, Catholic University of America Press, D.C., 1951, 94-110.
10. "Homosexuality and Vocations". *American Ecclesiastical Review*, January, 1971 (Vol. 164, No. 1), 51-52.
11. William F. Lynch, *Images of Hope*, N.Y., Menton-Omega, 1966, 120.
12. Notes taken in seminar on celibacy at *Catholic Theological Society of America*, convention, June, 1970.

13. So holds John J. McNeil, S.J., "The Christian Male Homosexual," Part II, 747-758 *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, July 1970. Vol. 70, no. 10. Fr. McNeil cites Havelock Ellis in support of his opinion, overlooking a passage in Ellis' *Psychology of Sex*, N.Y., Garden City Reprint, 1954, 253-255, in which Ellis says: "It must be further remembered that the inverted sexual impulse is peculiarly apt for the ends of sublimation . . . It has often happened that inverts have devoted themselves with ardor to valuable social and philanthropic work for the benefit of the young of their own sex and found joy and satisfaction in the task . . ."

14. Jane Brody, "More Homosexuals Aide to Become Heterosexual", N.Y. Time Sunday, Feb. 28, 1971, Section A, and 47. The article reviews the work of Drs. Bieber and Associates, Hatter and Haddon. (See Bibliography) (T)
15. *National Catholic Reporter*, April 6, 1971, 8-9, features four articles by staff reporters concerning religion and the homosexual. Orthodox Catholic, Catholic and Protestant clergymen approve of homosexual liaisons as just as "natural" for homosexuals as heterosexual relations and marriage are for others. At a recent conference in N.Y. the Rev. Thomas Maurer advocated the admission of overt homosexuals to seminaries. Paul Breton, an ex-seminarian, was elected pastor of the "Community Church of Washington." Each Sunday liturgical services take place at St. Saints Unitarian Church. Similar gatherings are found in San Francisco and Milwaukee.
16. "Rational Guideposts on Homosexuality", *Rational Living*, Fall, 1970, 7.

16
 No indication
 for this footnote
 in text