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Reflections on a Retreat for Clerics with Homosexual Tendencies

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On the evening of Feb. 20, 1978 four priests and a permanent deacon began an 11 day retreat under my direction. Ranging in age from 35 to 59, these men came from places as distant as California and Nova Scotia. All five came with the expectation that a retreat might help them to bring homosexual tendencies under control. At the first evening session each person revealed what he hoped to gain from the retreat. Each reflected dissatisfaction with the past and a desire for spiritual conversion.

At the opening session of the retreat I read some goals concerned with ways in which members of the group could support one another in their common problem. No sooner was I finished when the most articulate member of the group declared that this was not going to be an ordinary retreat full of safe platitudes, but a real effort to come to grips with the homosexual condition. He felt that each person should tell the others where he was coming from so that each could really understand the depths of the other. Forthwith he narrated his own experience of the homosexual condition, and all the others responded with brief resumes of their own. At the end of the three hour session it was clear that these men were really intent upon the group method of exploring their problems and finding remedies. Before the opening session I had wondered how I would induce the participants to trust each other and to open up their persons, but the men themselves formed a bond of trust at the very beginning, and there was no difficulty of anyone locking himself into isolation. At the same time it was clear that no one wanted the retreat to become an extended psychological group session, although each saw the need for introspection and self-revelation as part of the process of personal growth.

Subsequent group discussions concentrated on the beginnings of homosexual behavior in each individual, how each first came to know

that he possessed homosexual desires, how he responded to that awareness, how he tended to keep this secret buried deep within himself, and how he eventually formed homosexual relationships. During this early phase it was necessary to call members of the group back from psychological theorizing or "headtripping." This tendency could have been dangerous were it not for the presence of a clinical psychologist from Catholic University, Dr. John F. Kinnane, who spent eight hours during the retreat in helping the retreatants to understand better the psychological aspects and the limitations of any psychological method for the full personal integration of the homosexual. The full significance of his contribution will become clear as I record subsequent events.

On the third morning a curious thing happened. One of the retreatants suggested that each member of the group should rate himself and all the other members, including me, on the Kinsey scale concerning the degrees of homosexuality-heterosexuality present in each person. In Kinsey's books of 1948 and 1953 a spectrum of tendencies from extreme heterosexuality to extreme homosexuality is projected. It is presupposed that many people have some minor tendencies toward homosexual behavior, and that some homosexual persons have a subordinate heterosexual interest. Midway between the two extremes is placed the bisexual person who has an erotic interest in members of both sexes. The rating 0 is given to the extreme homosexual, and 6 to the extreme heterosexual. Some researchers reject the entire scale.

Although I was reluctant to approve the above suggestion, I consented, thinking it would be a form of passing amusement to relieve the heavy strains of self-revelation. For one member of the group, however, it proved to be a delusion.

When this particular member got a 5 rating on the Kinsey scale (which meant that he was basically heterosexual with only a transient period of homosexual affectional preference) from several of his conferees, he became unduly impressed with his alleged heterosexual tendencies — so much so that during the group session with Dr. Kinnane at the end of the third day he asserted that he was very different from the other members, and that he did not think he was homosexual. To which Dr. Kinnane retorted: "Then what the hell are you doing here?"

Heterosexual Angered

This angered our would-be heterosexual and irked several others who were taken in by his tale of having fallen in love with a single woman whom he had known for the past 10 years during his parochial work. As he told his story, homosexual activity had been some years before, and then only occasional, whereas his heterosexual activity

was contemporary. He had never visited gay bars or baths. He kept referring to that "Goddamn celibacy" which he had embraced when he was too young to understand its meaning. For this reason the rest of the group was inclined to believe that he was not truly homosexual. Only Dr. Kinnane was not conned.

Upon Dr. Kinnane's second appearance the man repeated that he did not really think that he was homosexual; but, after a private session with Dr. Kinnane he was able to see the nature of his delusion. The kind of homosexual activity in which he had been involved clearly indicated that he was homosexual. Details are omitted to preclude his identification by anyone outside the group. The other members of the group were shocked to see how easily they had been fooled. Indeed, at the group session in which the man revealed his interview with Dr. Kinnane, he expressed his sorrow for deluding the group, however unconsciously. In any case, everyone saw both the superficiality of such ratings and the need for a clinician as well as a spiritual director. One other insight may be derived from the incident of ratings, namely, that everyone of the five homosexual persons was happy to receive a rating showing some heterosexual potential. No one wanted to be homosexual. This brings me to the attitudes which members of the group had toward themselves.

Initial responses revealed depths of self-hatred and despair which had to be poured forth by each person before the group could come to grips with the spiritual aspects of their problem. There were two members, however, whose problems were so complicated that they tended to intellectualize, thereby avoiding any real confrontation with their own problems, and impeding the progress of the group. Eventually, when the other members complained that they felt we were bogged down, I turned the attention of the group to the spiritual dimensions inherent in the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. In this effort I found support in a charismatic priest who conducted two sessions, teaching the rudiments of charismatic prayer. Four retreatants showed great interest in charismatic prayer, going out on three occasions to lay charismatic groups, and discussing their insights at subsequent sessions of the group. At the close of the retreat all but one testified that such a prayer experience is invaluable for the spiritual life. The remaining person was satisfied with traditional forms of prayer, particularly devotion to the Blessed Sacrament.

From a spiritual point of view, the reluctance of the retreatants to fully admit their homosexual condition, which I have already indicated, impeded their progress. Unless a person admits his homosexual tendencies, he can hardly accept his powerlessness over the condition. But no true spiritual development is possible unless there is full admis-

sion of this powerlessness. In the situation I was not certain that everyone came to that admission before the end of the retreat. Subsequent correspondence indicates that three had done so.

During the 11 full days the following points were covered: 1) admission of natural helplessness over the personal condition; 2) willingness to turn one's life over to a caring God; 3) actual decision to surrender one's life to God; and 4) a moral inventory of the past with resolutions for the future. Three of the five made the moral inventory before the end of the retreat.

Most Powerful Catalysts

In my judgment, the most powerful catalysts in the psychodynamics of the retreat were the insights of a homosexual layman, who, after seven years in the gay subculture has been living a chaste life during the last 25 years. The retreatants were able to identify with him. He saw through the rationalizations of several members who were inclined to cling to homosexual lovers; he talked "cold turkey" with more authority than Dr. Kinnane or myself. Although at first frightened by his apparent rigor, they came to realize that he possessed a wisdom rooted in both worldly experience and deep spirituality. He stressed the importance of spiritual direction in relating the fact that he had come regularly to me for 25 years.

The discussion which followed on a plan of life for the future revealed the experience of the group that they had found more difficulty in the selection of a therapist who would support them in a chaste way of life than in the pursuit of a reliable spiritual director. (I had thought the opposite was true.) They also saw the need to cultivate at least a few deep friendships, and to seek out some community of support.

Besides an adaptation of the 12 steps of the A.A., the *Devout Life of St. Francis de Sales* (with its final section on retreats) and van Breemen's *As Bread That Is Broken* proved helpful. During each day's liturgy, prepared by one of the participants, dialogue sermons focused aptly on the spiritual aspects of the previous day's psychological insights. By the middle of the retreat a wonderful bond of trust had been forged. One of the retreatants put it this way: "It was as if we were all wearing (confessional) stoles."

Follow-up: It was suggested that the group make another retreat the following year, but so far no action has been taken to make this a real possibility. Two of the five are in regular contact with me, while two others have corresponded. I see the need to reach the remaining person. Together with the layman, one helped me give a directed retreat to a homosexual priest in June, 1978. In this way we were able to provide a community of support to the lone priest.

REFLECTIONS: At this early stage it is difficult to assess the complete benefits of the retreats. Although it was an exhausting experience, the participants left with a feeling of hope for the future. In each person there was the sense that some other homosexual persons "understand how I feel, and I can reveal myself to them, and I need not be concerned that I will lose their friendship."

As each person listened to the agony of the others, each came to realize that "gay is not good." Each also realized that he would have to find the kinds of friends he made during the retreat. He must find a spiritual director, since the problem was recognized not only as psychological, but also as deeply spiritual.

CONCLUSION: In this article I have indicated some of the spiritual elements entering into the control of homosexual activity. The pilot retreats show that the answer to homosexual involvement for clerics and religious may be practically resolved by planning and living a spiritual life rather than by concentrating on sexual re-orientation, which, generally at this time in life, can mean nothing more than some form of control over sexual desires.

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