

May 1969

## Female Homosexuality

John F. Harvey

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

---

### Recommended Citation

Harvey, John F. (1969) "Female Homosexuality," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 36 : No. 2 , Article 5.  
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lmq/vol36/iss2/5>

## Female Homosexuality

Very Reverend John F. Harvey O.S.F.S.

In this article it is assumed that the reader possesses fundamental concepts of homosexuality, particularly the fact that homosexuality is not an all or none condition: "All gradations can exist from apparently exclusive homosexuality without conscious capacity for arousal by heterosexual stimuli to apparently exclusive heterosexuality."<sup>1</sup> A more recent study stresses the presence of masculine elements in the female personality and feminine characteristics in the male with sexual orientation beginning as early as eighteen months.<sup>2</sup> The personality of man or woman is open to development in

either a homosexual or heterosexual manner: "All human beings are capable of homosexual activity. Whether this propensity is woven into the neurotic structure depends upon many factors."<sup>3</sup>

Even among normal individuals many variations occur within the limits of masculinity and femininity; likewise, many male inverts approximate female characteristics and mannerisms, while female homosexuals think, dress, and act in a masculine way. The very terms *masculine* and *feminine* are open to variant interpretations.<sup>4</sup> After saying this, however, I want to concentrate on the condition of the female homosexual, as I have come to know her in pastoral experience. I should like to specify some of the ways in which she differs from the male invert.

---

*Father Harvey is Dean of DeSales Hall School of Theology; he is an Assistant Professor of Theology, Dunbarton College, Holy Cross.*

She can easily keep her anomaly secret, because she can live with her lover without suspicion of society. She does not have to answer questions concerning her non-marital status. Generally she does not worry about blackmail. If married, she does not have the same difficulties as the male when it comes to maintaining at least the externals of marital and familial relationships. If she seeks pastoral counseling, she is more docile than her male counterpart. I shall give further particulars on these points but with the reservation that when all we know about female homosexuals has been said, it is precious little.

It seems as if society prefers to ignore the lesbian, as if it did not wish to acknowledge her existence, although it is estimated that at least 2 per cent of the female population engage in homosexual practices. Miss Clara Henning writes in a perceptive paper at the School of Canon Law, Catholic University: "Particularly in the legal sphere the resultant ignorance of lesbianism is partly due to the fact that the powers that be are all males; as males, our judges and prosecuting officers may be rather reluctant, psychologically, to recognize that women can find sexual gratification without men."

Last year I interviewed eight lesbians *vis a vis* their viewpoints on marriage. As one of the reasons for their way of life, they expressed the conviction that it is easier to sustain an intimate and total relationship with a woman than with a man. While not excluding the physical expression of sexuality, they sought primarily a psychological and emotional security in intimacy.

Rather than summarize the views of these women, I prefer to develop individual viewpoints, because this will be more profitable for the reader. A woman of twenty five felt that she had been trying to possess the qualities of her beloved, who happened to be eighteen years older than she was. The relationship went on for at least four years, during which religious considerations weighed heavily upon her. Then she formed a relationship with a man, to whom she became engaged, but whom she did not marry, because of his "inhibitions," which she further specified as lack of masculinity. She broke up the lesbian relationship, because she felt it was stunting her growth as an independent person; and she hesitates about seeking another man, because she is afraid marriage would be too restrictive in at least two different ways: no way out if the marriage does not work; and the time which must be given to children. She claims that she desires a selective, relatively independent, and permanent relationship with another woman, but will settle for a temporary liaison. At present, she has formed a relationship with a woman three years younger than herself with the mutual agreement that either may decide later to go heterosexual and marry.

I need not point out the lack of insight and indecision in this woman. It is not unusual among lesbians who have attempted heterosexual relationships, found them wanting, and yet are unwilling to renounce them in favor of homosexual relationships. As they remain in homosexual relationships, they keep the door open for a future heterosexual relationship. In one instance, I was surprised to discover that a lesbian leader still nourished the hope that she might marry.

Another woman, now twenty, had formed homosexual relationships from the age of twelve onwards in boarding school. At eighteen, however, she became engaged to a young man, but called it off. Methodically, she made a list of what she wanted in another person, and found it in a woman. She believes that men are notoriously unaware of woman's needs. Like the other women interviewed, save one, she has no fear or abhorrence of men, but only recognition that men are not able to form with them the kind of close relationship which they crave. Another married lesbian generalized that few men share the emotional needs of women.

Several of the women expressed sympathy for male homosexuals, who, they feel, have more urgent problems living in society under constant fear of prosecution, loss of reputation, and employment. This is one of their reasons for belonging to the Mattachine Society, which seeks to gain legal sexual freedom for the homosexual. One added that the problems of the female homosexual were personal rather than legal and social. The presence of female homosexuals does not threaten a predominantly male orientated civilization. She noted that the homosexual woman feels less guilty about her physical expression of affection than her heterosexual sister involved in an adulterous affair.

Several of the women made the point that no one really knows the etiology of lesbianism. Having discussed this question at meetings of lesbians, they are convinced there is no single cause. Ten different people have ten different backgrounds. The insensitivity of the male species is only one factor. There is the father who insisted on treating his daughter as a boy; there is the

mother who openly practiced lesbianism before her daughter. And so on. It would seem from their observations that psychiatry should pay more heed to the current relationships of the lesbian than to the maze of alleged causes. One of the group, for example, told me that despite twenty years of this way of life, much of it under psychiatric care, she wonders whether she can change to heterosexual. Her difficulty was American men who are too self-conscious of their maleness and who insist on filling stereotypical sexual roles. She found a Frenchman more charming and male, but he was not interested in marriage. Subsequently, she drifted into homosexual relationships. Like the other women interviewed, she had no aversion from the thought of physical relationships with a man; again, like them, she stressed that the psychological and emotional aspects of human friendship were far more important than the physical expression.

Within this group, as well as in the literature on the subject, it is noted that the only child is more likely to become orientated towards lesbianism, given, of course, *other environmental conditions*, particularly disrupted relationships to either or to both parents. Another factor I observed in this group was some were drawn to form intimate relationships with other women, older or peer age, from early childhood.

One woman wondered whether the greater independence she possessed in her lesbian life would not end in chaotic liberty. She was afraid both of the restrictive and binding nature of heterosexual marriage and of a lonely future as a lesbian. Like others, she remains in a homosexual environment despite her anxieties about the future.

Although a psychiatrist had not succeeded in helping her to make up her mind in what direction she should move, she gained much from the experience of psychotherapy. What she valued most from her relationship to the psychiatrist was his genuine concern for her. She commented: "The important aspect of transference is that it is a form of friendship."

The women felt that role-playing exists among homosexual women as well as heterosexual. As they expressed it, we are culturally conditioned to our respective male and female roles. Some lesbians are aggressive, and protective, while others are receptive of protection. In love-making alternative roles are taken among the older lesbians. It seems, however, that the aggressive teenage lesbian will go out of her way to make it known that she is a "butch."

Since most homosexuals are capable of assuming either an aggressive or a receptive role, one may disregard this factor in his effort to get to the roots of his homosexual tendencies. The invert is attached to physical acts with his own sex. That is the essential point. Nor is it of any medical or pastoral value to pry curiously into the details of love-making. The analysis of interior motivation, both unconscious and conscious, remains crucial to insight, and, hopefully, a better way of life.

From my interviews as well as from pastoral experience over the last thirteen years I am of the opinion that the female invert differs from the male invert in the depth of her attachments, and in the relative permanency of her relationship. As one letter expressed it: "Homosexual women stay together longer than homosexual men. The women have a better chance to express

themselves, yet their relationship is less physical, and in some cases the physical action is very infrequent . . . Inscribed rings, watches, and other jewelry are usually given the partner to seal their relationship."

One last point of comparison between male and female homosexuals is that of moral sensitivity. I do not believe it can be proven that lesbians feel more or less guilty about their relationships than male homosexuals. But those who have come for counsel are more receptive than male homosexuals to another point of view. The lesbian is not as likely as the male to defend her way of life by involved arguments of a pseudo-intellectual kind. She is more willing to admit the obviously emotional coloring in her attachments, to which she will continue to cling, not so much in rebellion against moral principles, but rather from fear of the vacuum which she foresees as consequent upon her renunciation of the beloved.

There is a sort of sad resignation in lesbians, as if they were saying to the heterosexuals: "We tried to be 'straight', but it does not work for us. How else do you expect us to live?" One Catholic lesbian summed up the thought of many of her friends when she said to me: "Father, what can the Church do to help us lesbians?" I shall respond with a few observations concerning the married lesbian and all other lesbians.

## THE LESBIAN AND MARRIAGE

A woman of pronounced homosexual tendencies (perhaps not really a homosexual) should not marry until she receives approval from professional

counselors. While the writer has not been able to find any recent and reliable study of the success or non-success of female inverts in marriage, there are indications of frequent failure.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Henry writes that the conspicuous lack of desire for marriage and children, found in so many lesbians, constitutes a poor prognosis. Of the homosexual who marries for reasons of appearance, a tendency found among members of both sexes, he writes: "Marriage to a well established homosexual can scarcely ever be recommended. Neglect of these considerations is likely to result in marital incompatibility and failure, and in the maladjustment of children born of the union."<sup>5</sup>

Henry warns the person of heterosexual bent not to marry a homosexual who at the moment seems so attractive to him. In many marriages between a female invert and a heterosexual man, or between a male invert and a heterosexual woman, the beginnings are bright, but very soon deep incompatibility between the partners asserts itself, with divorce and separation as frequent results.<sup>6</sup> For these reasons, and because marriage can be difficult enough for those who are free of these tendencies, it is usually prudent to guide anyone who seems to be a female invert away from marriage, however great the social pressures are to induce her to marry.

Nevertheless, in the *post factum* situation the married lesbian is less likely to suffer severe maladjustments than the male homosexual in a similar condition. The lesbian is like all other women in most everything, save the choice of a sexual object. Since many heterosexual women who are relatively frigid engage in intercourse without any desire, it is possible that the married lesbian could continue to take

part in marital relations without too much difficulty. It is probable that her husband will attribute her lack of response to frigidity, which, he will believe, she shares with many other wives. Indeed it is not unknown that women who are alienated in spirit from their husbands and reactively frigid drift into a homosexual affair with a close friend or acquaintance, and then manage to bring the liaison to an end as the result of counsel, prayer, and real amendment of will.

Whenever the doctor or priest is presented with a problem of this sort, he should be cautious not to make the judgment that this wife is a homosexual. It may be nothing more than alienation from her husband which has caused her to engage in this affair; under different circumstances, she might have committed adultery. Without denying the serious nature of marital alienation with its relative frigidity or psychological impotency, it is not the same as lesbianism, and the woman should be so instructed; otherwise, her *feeling* that she is homosexual may disturb her deeply, even producing the temptation to suicide in one situation with which I dealt. A gnawing bitterness toward self, projected toward others as well, was characteristic of this person until she understood that she could manage to avoid what had become a personal occasion of sin.

There are lesbians, however, who have sought divorce from their husbands, admitting as one of their reasons homosexual liaisons, just as there are male inverts who have pursued a similar course. The question arises whether marriages involving lesbians were invalid from the beginning. While the marriages of male inverts have been the subject of canonical study,

relatively little has been written about the marriages of lesbians.<sup>7</sup> Many questions may be raised. Was her homosexuality so pronounced that she did not have the free will to give consent to the marriage contract? Is her compulsion truly similar to that of the nymphomaniac? In most instances, lesbians are not compulsive or obligatory.<sup>8</sup>

Henning suggests that the vast majority of lesbians would be able to engage in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships, and that there are more situations of this sort than either the experience of psychiatrists reveals or any survey would surmise. Such women, sometimes called bisexual, are not likely to tell the truth to pollsters! It would seem then that only admittedly compulsive homosexual practices could pose an impediment for marriage on the basis of canons 1081/82 or 1086. It would seem likewise that the subject of female homosexuality should receive separate treatment in the revision of canon law.<sup>9</sup>

As already noted, female homosexuality seems more fluid and open to the possibility of conversion into heterosexuality than male, which is clearly categorized, particularly in the area of sexual potency. Yet all these speculations are based on insufficient data. We must wait for more thorough research into the actual phenomena of homosexual practices among married women before considering new canonical legislation or pastoral approaches.

#### SOME CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR DOCTORS AND PRIESTS

For the solution of these complex problems we need an attitude of openness, concern, and hope, of which latter quality the homosexual has little.

Writes Wainbright Churchill: "Though our society heaps upon these people its unmitigated contempt and puts every possible barrier in the way of their happiness, the contempt of the homosexual for himself and the barriers he creates between himself and his own happiness can hardly be equalled by anything imposed upon him from without. In most cases he is utterly convinced of his own depravity and the depravity of all other homosexuals."<sup>10</sup> While this opinion was made concerning male homosexuality, it applies analogously to the female. Father Nouwen considers what our attitude should be when the homosexual does not show any signs of wanting to change: "... it does not make much sense to push him or to try to change him. It is much more important to try to relate to him on the basis of reality, to show understanding, and to prevent any forms of rejection of him as a human being, who needs love and charity perhaps more than anybody else."<sup>11</sup>

Helmut Thielicke, a Lutheran theologian, writes that the homosexual needs intellectual and spiritual guidance in a very special way because of the slippery ground of his existence; "Therefore Christian pastoral care will have to be concerned primarily with helping the person to sublimate his homosexual urge."<sup>12</sup> This sublimation will be found "precisely in the actual danger zones, because here is where the 'charism', the possible 'charism' of the homosexual is presented with appropriate tasks."<sup>13</sup>

To be sure, only those homosexuals who are ready for sublimation, ascertained by the evidence of stability, should be encouraged to form with other homosexuals a kind of *Homosexuals Anonymous*. On a very small scale I have encouraged a chaste homo-

sexual to help a younger and confused overt homosexual. The older man needs pastoral guidance for his work: guidance to avoid relapse himself and to help the other person. This experiment could be extended to female homosexuals. Finally, I should like to refer the reader to my plan of life for the homosexual which appeared in *The Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, January, 1962, "Counseling the Homosexual", 328-335.

#### REFERENCES

1. *Wolfenden Report*, London, 1957, p. 12, par. 21.
2. Abel Jeanniere, *The Anthropology of Sex*, Harper and Row, 1967, 9-15.
3. Harry Gersham, "Reflections on the Nature of Homosexuality," *American J. of Psychoanalysis*, 26, no. 1, 1966, 46-62 at 47.
4. Robert J. Stoller, *Sex and Gender*, N.Y. Science House, 1968. (on the development of masculinity and femininity)
4. George Henry, *All the Sexes*, New York, Rinehart and Co., 1955, 333-336; Benjamin Karpman, *The Sexual Offender and His Offense*, New York, Julian Press, Inc., 1954, 362, ff.
5. Henry, *op.cit.*, 337.
6. Henry, *op.cit.*, 337.
7. John R. Cavanagh, *Counseling the Invert*, Milwaukee, Bruce, 1966, 135-146. This chapter treats marriage and the homosexual with valuable footnotes on canonical legislation: 142-146.
8. William W. Bassett, ed., *The Bond of Marriage*, Notre Dame, 1968, in an essay, "Valid Contract, Valid Sacrament?" gives a sympathetic treatment to the canonical problem of the homosexual marriage in which he refers to both male and female inverts. He sees the need for a view of marriage which goes beyond contractual consent (154-162).
9. Clara Henning, "Lesbianism: An Investigation of Female Homosexuality as a Possible Impediment to Marriage per canon 1081/82 and 1086." Unpublished paper, Catholic University of America School of Canon Law, 1967-1968.
10. *Homosexual Behavior Among Males*, N.Y., Hawthorn, 1967, 193.
11. Henri J. M. Nouwen, "Homosexuality: Prejudice or Mental Illness?" *National Catholic Reporter*, 11/29/67, 8.
12. *Ethics of Sex*, N.Y., Harper and Row, 1965, 278.
13. *Loc. cit.*

#### ADDITIONAL SELECT REFERENCES

- Anomaly. *The Invert*. 2nd edition. Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins Co., 1948.
- Baily, Derrick S. *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*. Longmans, Green, 1955. (Excellent on Scripture).
- Berg, Charles, and Allen, Clifford. *The Problem of Homosexuality*. New York: Citadel Press, 1958.
- Rieber, Irving, et alii, *Homosexuality*. Basic Book Publishers, N.Y., N.Y., (study of causality), 1962.
- Cory, Donald Webster, "Homosexuality," *Encyclopedia of Sexual Behavior*, ed. Albert Ellis and Albert Abarbanel, I 485-493, 1961.
- Harvey, O.S.F.S., John F. "Homosexuality as a Pastoral Problem," *Theological Studies*, XVI 86-108, March, 1955.
- "Homosexuality and Marriage," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, (December, 1961), 227-234.
- "Counseling the Homosexual," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, (January, 1962), 328-335.
- "Morality and Pastoral Treatment of Homosexuality" *Continuum*, vol. 5, Summer, 1967, no. 2, 279-297.
- "Counseling the Apparent Adolescent Homosexual," *Bulletin of Guild of Catholic Psychiatrists*, Oct. 1963, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp. 204-214.
- Henry, George W. *All the Sexes*. New York: Rinehart and Company, 1955.
- Lorand, Sandor (ed.), *Perversions, Psychodynamics and Therapy*, New York: Random House, Inc., 1956.
- Rees, J. Tudor, and Usell, Harley V. (ed.) *They Stand Apart*. London: Heinemann, 1955.