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HOMOSEXUALS, PASTORAL CARE OF

A letter addressed to the worldwide Catholic episcopate by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), “On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons” (Oct. 1, 1986), effectively confirmed the position of the United States National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) that homosexual persons are entitled to “a special degree of understanding and care” from the Christian community (pastoral letter, “To Live in Christ Jesus,” Nov. 11, 1976).

The essential requisites of this special pastoral care, as indicated in the CDF letter and in previous statements of the Holy See and local/regional episcopates, can be discussed under the following headings: 1) a realistic and compassionate understanding of the homosexual orientation or condition; 2) the avoidance of permissive approaches to the moral evaluation of homosexual genital activity; and 3) positive initiatives to facilitate the harmonious integration of homosexual persons into the Christian community and wider society.

Homosexual orientation. In its earlier “Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics” (Dec. 29, 1975), CDF acknowledged the homosexual orientation as follows:

A distinction is drawn, and it seems with some reason, between homosexuals whose tendency comes from a false education, from a lack of normal sexual development, from habit, from bad example, or from other similar causes, and is transitory or at least not incurable; and homosexuals who are definitively such because of some kind of innate instinct or a pathological constitution judged to be incurable (n. 8).

Consistent with this acknowledgment, the NCCB stated in 1976 that “some persons” discover that they have a homosexual orientation “through no fault of their

own,” and the 1986 CDF letter reaffirms that this orientation, in and of itself, “is not a sin” (n. 3). On the contrary, it is sinful to subject anyone to opprobrium or discrimination on account of his/her sexual orientation [Washington State Catholic Conference, “The Prejudice Against Homosexuals and the Ministry of the Church” (April 28, 1983)]. Persons so oriented, “like everyone else, . . . have a right to respect, friendship and justice, . . . [and] should have an active role in the Christian community” (NCCB 1976). Moreover, especially where a homosexual orientation is perceived as unalterable so as to exclude all prospect of marriage, it is precisely this fact which gives the person a special claim on the Church’s “pastoral understanding and care” (*ibid.*).

Considerable difficulties still beset efforts to reach a sound understanding of the homosexual orientation itself from an authentically Christian perspective. Behavioral and social scientists offer no clear or uniform account of this orientation in terms of its genesis, exclusivity, permanence or other related questions. Confronted with obscure data and often conflicting interpretations from within the scientific community, the Church disowns any pretense at “an exhaustive treatment” of the “complex” homosexual question, remaining open to enlightenment from the human sciences while confident of its own “more global vision . . . [of] the rich reality of the human person” (CDF 1986, n. 2).

In line with its mandate to uphold “the Catholic moral perspective” (*ibid.*), CDF indicates some concern lest a duly compassionate regard for persons with a homosexual orientation be misconstrued as license for the genital activity to which that orientation inclines. This is the evident sense of the Congregation’s statement that the homosexual “inclination,” understood as “a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil”—i.e., seen under the precise aspect of an inclination toward sinful sexual acts—is itself “an objective disorder” (n. 3). Whatever legitimate difficulties may be raised concerning this last phrase, two points should be made clear: the phrase does not signify that the homosexual orientation itself is in any sense sinful (indeed, as noted above, the exact opposite is stated); and it refers only to “a particular inclination” toward sin inherent in the homosexual orientation, not globally to all aspects of the sexual affectivity of persons so oriented—nor, even less, to the overall personality or character of such persons.

Reactions to the 1986 CDF letter, however, indicated that pastors find it extremely difficult to dissuade homosexual people from the notion that the Church views them as fundamentally flawed persons on account of their sexual orientation. This misperception may reflect the prone-

ness of many homosexual people to over-identify with their sexual orientation, viewing any criticism of any aspect of that orientation as a profound assault on their personal dignity. While such over-identification is surely inappropriate (CDF 1986, n. 16), it is often an understandable overreaction to the unjust rejection which these persons suffer [Bishop Francis Mugavero (Brooklyn), pastoral letter, “Sexuality: God’s Gift” (Feb. 11, 1976)]. Hence the foremost pastoral imperative—even prior to offering moral instruction—is for the Church to convince homosexuals in practical terms that it accepts them fully as persons whom it is ready to serve with genuine love and respect.

Homosexual activity. Inasmuch as pastoral care must also include moral instruction, the magisterium adheres to the traditional Judeo-Christian teaching that “homosexual activity, . . . as distinguished from homosexual orientation, is morally wrong” (NCCB 1976). Pope John Paul II, confirming this stand in an address to the United States hierarchy (Chicago, Oct. 5, 1979), stressed the obligation of bishops to maintain this teaching as “compassionate pastors” and “not betray [any homosexual] brother or sister” by holding out “false hope” that the teaching could change. The 1986 CDF letter echoes this approach (n. 15).

By contrast with the 1975 CDF declaration and the earlier tradition centered on natural law reasoning with reference to the procreative meaning of sexuality, the 1986 letter articulates the Church’s rejection of homosexual genital activity in terms of a theological anthropology emphasizing the unitive equally with the procreative dimension, as seen in the Genesis teaching on creation:

God . . . fashions mankind male and female, in his own image and likeness. Human beings, . . . in the complementarity of the sexes, . . . are called to reflect the inner reality of the Creator. They do this in a striking way in their cooperation with Him in the transmission of life by a mutual donation of the self to the other. . . . Homosexual activity is not a complementary union, able to transmit life; and so it thwarts the call to a life of that form of self-giving which the Gospel says is the essence of Christian living (nn. 5–7).

Although the same CDF document (n. 6) also cites various other biblical texts which comment adversely on homosexual practices—the Sodom story (Gn 19), the Levitical condemnations (Lv 18:22; 20:13) and Pauline writings (Rom 1:26–27; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tm 1:10)—these references are preceded by a stipulation that the Church’s position is not based “on isolated phrases for facile theological argument” (n. 5). In any case the relevance of this material is subordinate to that of the Genesis creation theology which provides “the basic plan for understanding

this entire discussion of homosexuality” (n. 6). Hence, in accord with sound theology as well as pastoral sensitivity, the presentation of the Church’s moral teaching should avoid an exaggerated emphasis on the condemnation of homosexual activity (such as would result from simplistic Biblical proofing) but should concentrate on articulating the positive “spousal significance” of human sexuality as the basis for recognizing the deficiency of any genital activity that does not do full justice to that significance.

The Church’s pastoral strategy is less developed as regards the positive guidance of those believers whose homosexual orientation precludes marriage—perhaps permanently, if this orientation resists change—and who meanwhile seem unprepared to live a celibate life. The dilemma of such persons is a very difficult one demanding special support and help from pastors and from the entire Christian community, instead of the contempt or rejection which has too often been the response.

The authoritative teaching (CDF 1975) indicates a general negative norm, *viz.*, that “no pastoral method can be employed which would give moral approval to these [homosexual] acts on the grounds that they would be consonant with the condition of such people,” but positive alternatives remain unspecified. Some local and regional episcopates (England and Wales 1979; San Francisco 1983), without recognizing committed homosexual relationships as an acceptable equivalent of marriage or morally endorsing homogenital acts within such relationships, have suggested the appropriateness of welcoming homosexuals thus situated into the full sacramental life of the Church if their relationship is prudently deemed the only present alternative to the incomparably worse evil of promiscuity (a particularly acute danger in face of the AIDS peril), and if there is reasonable hope that through prayer and the support of the Sacraments they may progressively grow into chastity. This approach emphasizes the need to respect the believer’s sincere and upright conscience, as well as the principle of gradualism as enunciated by John Paul II [*Familiaris consortio*, n. 34; confer, application to homosexuality by B. Kiely, *L’Osservatore Romano* (Nov. 14, 1986) n. 7].

Positive initiatives. The process of growth toward chastity itself requires support from pastors and the whole Church community. The Church cannot be effective in insisting upon rigorous moral standards for homosexual persons as regards chastity, or in discouraging their participation in permissive homophile communities, as long as it does not make wholesome friendship available to such persons within its own body. Ironically the deprivation of such friendship is itself a major provocation (often unconsciously) toward the very unchastity

which the Church condemns; if the basic human need for companionship, affection and intimacy is not met in wholesome ways, its fulfillment will be sought in disordered ways including inappropriate sexual conduct. The 1986 CDF letter includes a guarded but unmistakably clear acknowledgment that all Catholics must take every reasonable opportunity to help their homosexual fellow believers replace their lonely isolation with healthy interpersonal relationships (n. 15).

The same document contains other noteworthy progressive elements, for example, the identification of “violent malice in speech or in action”—now often called homophobia—as a continuing evil which “deserves condemnation from the Church’s pastors wherever it occurs,” and likewise a strong affirmation that homosexual people share in “the intrinsic dignity of each person [which] must always be respected in word, in action and in law” (n. 10). Inclusion of the homosexual question in catechetical programs on sexuality is now encouraged, and particular concern is also to be shown for the families of homosexual persons (n. 17).

It is the responsibility of diocesan bishops, individually and/or in regional conference, to implement such initiatives according to conditions in their respective territories (CDF 1986, nn. 13, 15, 17). During the 1990s a growing number of United States dioceses developed programs of outreach and support for gay and lesbian Catholics; and the NCCB officially recognizes the National Association of Catholic Diocesan Lesbian and Gay Ministries (NACDLGM). In 1997 the NCCB Committee on Marriage and Family issued a warmly positive pastoral letter titled “Always Our Children” that was directed primarily to parents of homosexual persons but was also addressed to gay and lesbian Catholic themselves; it was slightly revised in 1998, following input from the CDF.

The tendency of the CDF has been to stress the cautionary points of its 1986 letter. In a June 1997 memorandum, the congregation again advised bishops to be wary of civil-rights initiatives regarding homosexual persons, even suggesting that some instances of social discrimination against these persons would not be unjust. In July 1999, after years of investigation by various church agencies, the CDF ordered Sr. Jeannine Gramick, SSND, and Father Robert Nugent, SDS, the co-founders of New Ways Ministry in the United States, to cease their nearly three decades of nationwide ministry to homosexual persons and their families; the two had not satisfied the congregation’s demand for an “unequivocal” declaration of their “personal assent” to the condemnations articulated in its 1975 and 1986 documents with regard to homosexual activity. NCCB president Bishop Joseph Fiorenza (of Houston, Texas) sought at once to assure gay Catholics

and their families that the CDF action against Gramick and Nugent would not weaken the United States hierarchy’s commitment to promote a caring and compassionate ministry to the homosexual community.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church reiterates that homosexual acts can “under no circumstances . . . be approved” (no. 2357), and adds that the homosexual orientation itself is “objectively disordered” (no. 2358, in the *editio typica*). The same text also states, however, that the number of homosexually oriented men and women “is not negligible,” that these persons “must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity,” and that any sign of “unjust discrimination” against them should be avoided. Even the summons to chastity is couched in terms of a confident expectation that homosexual people are capable of “Christian perfection” (no. 2359).

In presenting the full range of church teaching as summarized in these Catechism references, the more benign and positive elements of this teaching (which are less well known) need to be better highlighted and more broadly applied in practice, whereas the more severe and cautionary elements should be treated as subordinate though not ignored. These latter actually indicate problems, which can be effectively addressed only by a full and unambiguous commitment of the Church to a multi-dimensional effort of positive pastoral support for homosexual persons. If the attraction of such persons to homophile movements opposed to Catholic moral teaching is cause for concern, it must also be admitted that such movements have provided at least a modicum of the needed personal acceptance and understanding, which homosexuals have not often found in the Church or elsewhere. Hence the Church must provide an alternative for these men and women that clearly offers a more adequate and genuine affirmation of their personal worth. In sum, the commitment to uphold authentic Christian standards of sexual morality must be seen as an integral part of wider pastoral efforts to promote charity and justice.

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HONDURAS, THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN

A republic located in Central America, Honduras is bounded on the north by the Caribbean Sea, on the south-