



Dialogue, Debate

BY [EDWARD VACEK, S.J.](#) | OCTOBER 29, 2001

Sexual Diversity and Catholicism

Ed. by Patricia Beattie Jung with Joseph Andrew Coray

Liturgical Press. 311p \$29.95.

According to Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone, Secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, it may be heretical to hold that church teaching can learn from experience. If so, this collection of essays is filled with heresy. In the Vatican approach, one begins with Catholic teaching. Experience is welcomed if it warrants that teaching, but deemed distorted if it disconfirms the teaching.

Most of the 16 authors of this collection incline somewhat to the opposite error, namely, that traditional moral norms must be changed whenever they do not conform to contemporary experience. Like the great majority of American Catholics, these authors disagree at important points with official teaching on sexuality. What distinguishes them from the average American Catholic is that they have thought long and deeply about Catholic theology. Moreover, unlike so many who migrate from the church, these scholars have chosen to work within this Catholic colony, even as they work to change the sexual laws of the fatherland.

Most of these essays, all of which are well worth reading, derive from a symposium at Loyola University in Chicago. The authors collectively illustrate how, over time, the practice of Catholic theologizing leads to the mutual modification and correction of received tradition, official teaching and present experience.

While the majority of Catholics no longer agree with church teaching on many sexual issues, that majority has not similarly shifted on the issue of homosexuality. Most authors of this book—which deals mainly with homosexuality—travel in a different direction. (Theologians, like the magisterium, appeal selectively to the *sensus fidelium*.) What follows are some highlights of the journey.

Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, whose pastoral zeal often makes him the patron saint of lost causes, describes how, in his own family, church teaching has been harmful. Without approving homosexual activity, he pleads that gay and lesbian persons are following their conscience. While this pastoral approach is daring for a bishop, it avoids the question that theologians must press: is homosexual activity wrong? In the book's most conservative essay, James Hanigan, a professor of moral theology and chair of the theology department at Duquesne University, rightly observes that the contemporary debate turns on whether contemporary experience and science can “override” biblical and ecclesiastical teaching.

Of course, the answer depends on the issue. Pope John Paul II allows contemporary experience to override Scripture and tradition on capital punishment. Susan Ross, a professor of theology and women's studies at Loyola University Chicago, points out how the pope similarly sets aside the historical-critical approach when treating scriptural texts on sexuality in favor of a more meditative, cosmic approach. And when it comes to the 6 to 10 biblical texts on homosexuality, church teaching invokes a more literal reading.

The authors of the biblical section of this book, by contrast, use the historical-critical method to show that what the original authors intended is not relevant to contemporary life. As Mary Rose D'Angelo, who teaches theology/gender studies at the University of Notre Dame, very helpfully points out, liberal scholars often use two strategies to “override” the biblical condemnations of homosexual activity. On the one hand, they cross-examine those who adduce such texts while ignoring many other texts, e.g., the Bible's condemnation of marital sex during the menstrual period and its requirement that rapists marry their victims. They note that Scripture often acts like a mirror: we see what we already believe. And they query whether homophobia explains the selectivity.

On the other hand, exegetes also argue that homosexuality in the Bible is not homosexuality “as we know it.” After examining the New Testament context, Bruce Malina, a professor of biblical studies at Creighton University, charges that Paul’s teaching on homosexuality cannot make sense to us in the 21st century. (One should at least ask whether any lack of coherence between the tradition and our experience might be due to our blindness.)

D’Angelo and Patricia Beattie Jung, a professor of moral theology at Loyola Chicago, recommend a third, more aggressive approach. They argue that on some matters Scripture is “morally mistaken.” They propose a preferential option for victims of the oppressive sexual and gender hierarchies still supported by the Bible. According to the philosopher David Ozar (Loyola Chicago), the source of the problem is the male/female-heterosexual paradigm. This paradigm obscures the fact that most people do not strictly fit these categories (there is some tendency toward homosexuality in most heterosexuals, and most men have “feminine” tendencies and vice versa). Worse, the standard paradigm blinds us to those who are cross-dressing, intersexed, bisexual or homosexual. And injustice is the result.

Sidney Callahan draws upon her experience as wife, mother and professional psychologist to argue that the church’s norms insufficiently take into account the complexity of sexuality. Isiaah Crawford and Brian Zamboni (somewhat biased) use numerous empirical studies to demonstrate that real gay and lesbian persons do not fit most of the stereotypes. Sadly, they also report that negative attitudes of homophobia/heterosexism are associated with religiosity, sexual conservatism and authoritarian practices.

Finally, in a remarkable essay, Cristina Traina, who teaches religion at Northwestern University, compares her sexual experience as a wife and mother with the normative descriptions presented by John Paul II. She commends him for depicting sex at its ideal best, but observes that perhaps only 10 times in all her years of marriage has she experienced such sex. Then she persuasively demonstrates how trying constantly to realize such an ideal would have ruined her marriage and family. During the 20th century the principles of the magisterium’s sexual ethics have massively changed, in great part through the teaching of Pope John Paul II. These changes largely occurred not through biblical exegesis or recovery of tradition, but through the influence of contemporary science and experience. These fine essays continue this development of moral theology.

Edward Vacek, S.J., is a professor of Christian ethics at Weston Jesuit School of Theology, Cambridge, Mass.