

1981

Group Support in Helping the Homosexual
To Live a Fully Integrated Life¹

As preface to my views on the value of group support in helping the homosexual person to live chastely, I should like to acknowledge that there are other theological views which attempt to justify a steady love relationship between two men or two women, a kind of holy union, analogous to marriage, and definitely expressed in a genital way. Since few writers try to justify promiscuous genital expression, I shall confine my observations to those theological positions which are widespread and popular. First there is the view of Father Charles E. Curran. It regards homosexual genital acts as contrary to the magisterial norm of the Roman Catholic Church, which holds that genital intercourse should take place only between a man and woman married to one another. But since homosexual persons did not choose their orientation, and since celibacy is neither desirable nor practically possible, a compromise solution is in order for them. This would justify a steady relationship between two homosexuals who in this way experience some love and affection. The homosexual condition itself is the result of a sin-filled situation which should not be allowed to penalize the individual. Ordinarily, then, homosexual acts are wrong, but not for the homosexual in a steady relationship.

Another popular position is that of John J. McNeill, S.J., founder of the New York Chapter of Dignity. In The Church and the Homosexual McNeill speculates that God creates homosexuals who are meant to mediate between man and woman. Homosexual acts are good in themselves for those whose orientation is homosexual. They are immoral if performed by a heterosexual person. In Romans, I, 26-27, St. Paul is condemning only homosexual acts performed by heterosexual persons. While McNeill urges the steady homosexual relationship, he permits² a certain measure of promiscuous acts as one seeks a stable relationship.

Another position, increasingly accepted, is that of Philip Keane in Sexual Morality. Homosexual acts are not in conformity with the Judaeo-Christian norm for sexual activity, namely, the genital union of marriage; but, if they are expressed by two homosexuals in a steady relationship, they become good. Inasmuch as they do not fulfill the general norm for sexual behavior, they are ontic or pre-moral evils; but inasmuch as they are expressions of true love between committed persons, they are morally good.³

Most readers of the Dignity Newsletter are familiar with the opinion of Gregory Baum (Commonweal, February, 1974) who holds that expressions of human sexuality, affective or genital, are good, provided they are mutual. It is not a question of heterosexuality or homosexuality, but of mutual, free, and loving relationships.

It is clear that none of these views is in accord with the official teaching of the Church which I choose to follow. After I have outlined it, I should like to suggest ways in which one can live it. The teaching of the Church is expressed well in the Vatican Declaration on Sexual Ethics (1976). This

document draws a sharp distinction between the objective morality of homosexual acts and the subjective responsibility of the person performing the actions. Homosexual acts are seen as lacking in an indispensable finality for sexual activity, namely, the procreative purpose which is inseparably connected with such activity. Besides this argument of the Declaration, there are other arguments against homosexual activity. One argument is that homosexual activity does not really achieve a true physical union. Penis in anus or mouth does not compare with the ordinary physical union of husband and wife. The same argument is pertinent to the attempts of union between females. Such are indeed forms of bodily massage, different from masturbation, because another person is involved; they do not achieve any transcendent goal of the possibility of a child, as in marital relationships. There is also in even the most steady of homosexual relationships a form of sterility. There are no children, no family history, no past and no future. Finally, there is lacking in the homosexual relationship the richness of the man-woman union. A man and a woman complement each other in marriage with a depth not attainable in a homosexual coupling.

Each of these arguments could be developed, but it will be more pertinent to suggest some ways in which the homosexual can live a celibate life, whether he/she be clerical, religious, or lay.

I would reduce the elements in a celibate's life to four: (1) prayer; (2) inner discipline; (3) reception of the sacraments; and (4) group support. Already in other places I have treated the first three,⁴ and more recently I have expressed my method of direction in two pamphlets: "Pastoral Care and the Homosexual", The Knights of Columbus, No. 85, 1978; and "A Spiritual Plan to Redirect One's Life", Daughters of St. Paul, 1979. In this article I should like to develop the importance of group support. From thirteen retreats given to priests and brothers over the past three years and from Friday evening encounters in New York City during the past year, I have noted that individuals who thought that they had no control over homosexual tendencies have come to realize that chastity is practically possible for them. They are willing to struggle against their desires for genital acts. They have found that they can have intimacy and friendship without the need for genital expression. This is not to say that the process of group support is a form of cure-all. Persons aspiring to the chaste life may fail now and then, but they know better how to get back to an ascetical way of life through the support of a group.

In this respect there is a legitimate comparison between homosexual support groups and Alcoholics Anonymous. In both instances the person seeks to practice virtue (sobriety or chastity) by identifying with other members of the support group. There are other striking similarities. Just as the alcoholic takes his first step toward sobriety by acknowledging the fact that he is alcoholic, so the homosexual person must accept himself intellectually and affectively as a homosexual, no longer pretending that he is not, and working through his bitterness in being what he did not choose to be. Again, the alcoholic looks for a power greater than himself, while the homosexual realizes the necessity of sharing his life and his friendship with others "in the same boat." Furthermore, just as the alcoholic must turn himself over to a provident and caring God, so the homosexual person must surrender himself/herself to the God who understands.

On soul separation - there is lack of complementarity

As I have outlined these first three steps, they appear more simple than they really are. Again, some homosexual persons object to the comparison with the 12 steps of A.A. Still others find it apt. In any case, those who make spiritual progress experience these phases.

Perhaps the group spiritual direction method which I use can be appreciated more completely if we recall the way many spiritual directors help the homosexual person only on a one-to-one basis. The person may tell the spiritual director all about his feelings, temptations, aspirations, and failings. But he shares them with no one else—with the exception perhaps of a psychiatrist or a clinical psychologist. He may have felt the support of the priest or psychologist, but of no one else. In group discussion, however, he can share with other members of the group his deepest feelings and know that he is accepted just the way he is. As he listens to others speaking about their difficulties, he perceives that he has been there. At subsequent meetings he listens to another member who has had some degree of success in avoiding the promiscuous scene, and he is filled with hope that he can overcome compulsive activity.

In mentioning "compulsive activity" several distinctions are relevant. Not all, or even most homosexual activity is compulsive, but some is. When a man in public life risks his political career to have sex in a public restroom, he is hardly acting with human freedom. Again, compulsive activity is very complex, so that no one can really understand compulsive activity unless he knows the person's background. Finally, homosexuals whose activity has become compulsive derive more benefit than others from group spiritual direction. Nonetheless, it is also beneficial to the person who is trying to move from a steady lover situation to complete abstinence from genital activity, as I learned more recently.

Very early in the process the importance of interior prayer is introduced into the discussion, and the members of the group learn how to engage in this form of prayer. By interior prayer is meant the cultivation of conversation with God, or prayer of the heart. "Cor ad cor loquitur." It is the root of the spiritual life, and the heart of celibacy, which is so frequently misunderstood. For this reason the positive meaning of celibacy needs explanation.

Celibacy: While assuming that celibacy means abstinence from genital relationships, we realize that it is much more. It is one of the sexual ways in which humans express love for one another and for God Himself. It is an art of loving. Motivated as it is by love of the person of Christ, it is meant to be both a form of service to the Church and a dedication of one's person to the Lord through prayer.

But there is a human aspect to celibacy which should be considered. Celibacy demands not only that you be part of a community of support, but that you form deep friendships with others who share your goals. The homosexual person needs such friendships, because more often than not he is a lonely person who has had difficulty throughout his life in sustaining deep relationships. Indeed he may have labored under the misconception that the price of chastity was aloofness and distance from anyone to whom one is

attracted. "You must not allow anyone to get too close to you." But, as psychologists affirm, everyone needs a few close friends with whom one can be oneself, and the homosexual person may find such friends within the support group which he attends. On the practical level, I have noticed such friendships developing in both the lay groups and the clerical groups with whom I work. Such relationships not only help the persons to remain chaste, but also to mitigate loneliness. It is clear that two homosexual persons can be friends without carnal and genital contact. The motivation of the members of the group to live chaste lives causes them to observe ordinary cautions in their expression of physical affection. Thus, they learn that one can reach a high degree of intimacy with another human without the need of genital expression. It is a happy discovery--contrary to the popular myth that all humans must have genital relations to be fulfilled.

Another aspect of group support among homosexuals is the frequency of communication among members during the intervals between meetings. In working with priests and brothers I have observed during the past three years that several of them will continue the dialogue begun in the retreat, meeting once a month, and communicating by phone more frequently. With the help of a priest and brother, both of whom made the retreat, I hope to improve this system of communication among former retreatants. In August there will be an alumni retreat. This is of great value to me and to the retreatants, who speak quite honestly about the successes and failures of the past year. They had learned during the retreats that the effort to lead the chaste life remains a struggle, and they should not be discouraged by failures. In the alumni retreat one hears tales of success and of temporary failure. But as a result of the retreats persons who lapse into homosexual acts get up more quickly and seek help from another who understands their human weakness.

Now it could be objected that the group support advocated as an important element for the living of the chaste way of life is effective only with persons committed by vow, that is to say, priests and religious, who, presumably, are the only ones receiving the gift of celibacy. In gay literature it is asserted that God surely does not give the gift of celibacy to twenty million homosexual men and women. Thus, the unspoken premise of this objection is that complete chastity or celibacy is morally impossible for the vast majority of homosexual persons.

"This premise should be challenged in a wider horizon than that of the homosexual. Many lay persons, single or married, divorced or separated, may be bound to complete chastity for long periods of time, or indeed for the rest of their lives, because of the circumstances under which they live. Some wanted to marry, but never found the right person. Others were abandoned, still others suffered mental breakdowns, and on and on. The tragedies of human life place people in situations where they are obliged to a life of chastity. Mysteriously, God allows it and gives necessary grace for these persons to live in chastity. Why, then, should theologians make exception for persons who are oriented toward persons of his/her own sex? For such persons God will give the gift of celibacy, not restricting it, as falsely presumed, only to those who have taken vows." (John Harvey, O.S.F.S., Letter to Editor, America, March 21, 1981, p. 217)

Conclusion: The program of spiritual direction which I have developed for laity as well as for clergy and religious, is based upon the biblical truths that human sexual genital activity is meant to be between man and wife, and not between man and man, or woman and woman. It is likewise rooted in the Catholic teaching that God gives to each person an abundance of grace to observe His law. It presupposes, also, that man and woman can freely sub-limate their genital impulses into many loving acts toward their neighbors, especially those most in need of our affection. While in no way denying that there is genuine affection between two homosexuals in a stable union, I ask them whether they really need the genital expression to sustain their love. From my experience with such couples, I believe that they can do without the sex act and reconcile their consciences with the perennial teaching of Revelation.

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FOOTNOTES

1. While in this article I refer mainly to the male homosexual, the same principles also apply to the female person. It is unfortunate that so little has been researched about the Lesbian.
2. John F. Harvey, O.S.F.S., "Contemporary Theological Views" in John R. Cavanaugh, Counseling the Homosexual, pp. 222-238, Our Sunday Visitor, Huntington, Indiana, 1977.
3. Paulist Press, N.Y., 1977, pp. 84-90.
4. See, among others, The Priest, July-August 1977, "Chastity and the Homosexual"; IBID, March 1980, "The Effect of Gay Propaganda on the Adolescent Boy or Girl"; "The Controversy Concerning the Psychology and Morality of Homosexuality"; et alia.