



Courage and the Cross: The Problem of Same Sex Attraction

By Rev. Paul N. Check

The Pauline year has given the Church the opportunity to meditate on the life and work of one her greatest saints. The fruits of St. Paul's apostolic labors are evident enough. But what made this man such a useful instrument in God's hands? What was the reason for his holiness? In answer, may I propose an episode recorded by St. Paul himself near the close of his second letter to the Corinthians. He reports that he was bothered by a "thorn", and that he begged the Lord three times to remove it. We do not know what this thorn was, and it really does not matter. Yet from the urgency of his prayer, we can surmise that this matter was gravely disturbing to Paul. Perhaps he believed that he could be a more effective apostle without it.

"Neither are your ways my ways," the Lord told the prophet Isaiah (55:8). Now, Jesus further specifies these words from the old covenant to Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). I believe that we find the secret of St. Paul's sanctity here in this passage. In the midst of his suffering, St. Paul discovers more of the wisdom and providence of God. Embracing Christ's admonishment, St. Paul then writes compelling words of strength and consolation: "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10). There was no other path to holiness for the apostle, nor will there be for any of us.

Cardinal Newman said that we will always learn far more about the Cross of Christ by bearing it after Him, rather than by glowing accounts of it. Jesus' bride, the Church, knows this well in her being and through the lived experience of her mem-

bers. As the Cross united heaven and earth, so does it unite human hearts to the pierced and wounded Sacred Heart. With a mother's love, the Church offers the grace, mercy, and peace of her crucified and risen Savior to a fallen and struggling world through her sacraments, her teaching, and her apostolates. One such is Courage Apostolate.

Courage was founded in New York City almost thirty years ago to assist men and woman who are afflicted with the thorn of same sex attraction (SSA). "Encourage" is a ministry to their families. Today these ministries are international and are endorsed by the Holy See. Members of Courage strive to achieve not only external chastity according to the teachings of the Catholic Church, but also interior chastity, or "chastity of the heart", as its founder, Father John Harvey, OSFS, often says. Prayer, Mass and Confession, Christian fellowship, and service to others are the means to the goal. In addition, the spiritual fatherhood of the priest chaplain of a local Courage chapter can help to address a "father wound", particularly in the heart of a man. The apostolate seeks to foster chaste friendships among its members. Above all, Courage desires to help men and women with SSA to become saints, by aiding them to find God's grace in and through their human weakness.

Of course, much of the world does not regard the condition of homosexuality as a weakness, let alone a cross or a way to holiness. Emotions and confusion make a conversation about this topic difficult, even painful. We must also say that rash judgment and severity are not the tone of the

Gospel. The attitude for all of the Master's disciples when approaching this question can be found in St. Paul's example in 2 Corinthians 12. Humility, a docile spirit, and a willingness to trust in God's providence dispose the heart to find strength in weakness and to address charitably those burdened by the weakness. In trying to follow the example of the Lord, Courage always desires to think in terms of individual people and their needs, as opposed to the idea of homosexuality as a cultural issue. St. Paul would call this putting on "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16).

The problem of same sex attraction is often vexing to those who struggle with it, and it is not easily vanquished. Shame, loneliness, and a sense of hopelessness are the enemies. With abundant charity, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* acknowledges that those who have homosexual tendencies are many, and that this inclination "constitutes for most of them a trial" (par 2358). Often people with SSA also struggle with sexual addiction, drug or alcohol abuse, depression, anxiety or other mental illness. This remains true even in the places where sexual promiscuity is widely tolerated. Men and women with SSA—perhaps up to 40% of them—may very likely have been the victims of sexual abuse as a child. (This is good to keep in mind if a young person claims to be "gay".) In many cases, they will say that as far back as they can remember, they have "always felt different", or that they "did not choose this". But St. Paul offers a way forward: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love Him" (Rom 8:28). In everything . . . in every thorn.

Let's continue with some history, a definition of terms, and the origins of SSA before turning to the question of morality. North Carolina State English Professor R. V. Young points out that not until the late nineteenth century is the word "homosexuality" accepted as a term of language intended to describe the permanent *condition* of a fixed group of *people*, namely, "homosexuals". In the language of the Greeks and Romans and in that of Sacred Scripture, the vocabulary used was drawn instead from the *action* or the *behavior*. Young suggests that this novelty allows the proponents of the sexual revolution to control the terms of social discourse. While it is certainly true that we are transformed by our actions, we can also agree that someone's identity cannot be collapsed into his or her sexual appetite.

The word "homosexual" when used as a noun is ambiguous and so not helpful in discussion. Does it refer to an involuntary attraction, to a chosen behavior, or to a set of convictions? Furthermore, the psychological sciences indicate that there is a wide spectrum of those who are attracted to members of the same sex, in terms of the intensity of the sexual attraction. The Courage apostolate then, prompted by Christian charity and sound anthropology, uses the terminology "men and women with same sex attraction".

Where does same sex attraction come from? First, no scientific evidence establishes the existence of a "gay gene". If there were a genetic explanation, then in those cases where one identical twin has same sex attraction, so would the other. As it happens, the simultaneous occurrence of SSA in such twins (who have identical genes) is very low, perhaps as low as 10%. Beyond that, the many well-documented cases of change in sexual attraction would also tend to disprove a genetic (and therefore fixed) cause of SSA. Finally, as author and researcher Dale O'Leary has remarked, same sex activity is always sterile, and so it cannot be considered a neutral variance within the human population.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

properly states that SSA is "objectively disordered" (par 2358). These words can at once be jarring and liberating. They are jarring because they can be heard as a moral judgment of the *person* (which they are not), as opposed to an assessment of the *inclination* as measured against human nature. The desire to lie is objectively disordered, as are desires to steal, to cheat, and to fornicate. When acted upon, these inclinations will always be contrary to the good of the person as recognizable by the *prima gratia*, the natural moral law, which is imprinted in the mind and heart of everyone (cf. Rom 2:15). The words from the *Catechism* are liberating precisely for this reason. Something inside the person with SSA tells him or her that this desire does not accord with nature, and the voice of the Church confirms his or her instinct.

So we return to the question of the origin or source of the problem. Same sex attraction is a developmental disorder that is both treatable and preventable. It indicates an incomplete character development likely based on the convergence of several factors: temperament, environment, experience, and free will. In other words, we are born male or female, but we learn and grow into our masculinity or femininity through family and friends, acquaintances, and other aspects of our personal and social history. What matters in every case is how the person *responds* to these factors.

Some circumstances do recur when the profiles of many people with SSA are studied: a broken or turbulent home, the child's alienation from the same sex parent (e.g., the boy from his father) or even the perception of an estrangement, a child's failure to integrate with same sex peers (especially true for boys), and sexual trauma. What this means is that SSA is not first a sexual problem, but a symptom or component of an antecedent problem, i.e., a gender identity *deficit*, and traceable in large part to how someone *reacts* to the foregoing situations. Something that should have happened in the development of the child did not happen. In particular, the natural desire for healthy relationships with persons of the

same sex is frustrated or unfulfilled. When this is coupled with other factors, particularly a sensitive temperament, that desire *may* become eroticized.

So feelings of SSA or "being different", no matter how far back they are perceived to be, do not constitute proof that someone was "born that way".

An awareness of these things helps us to identify children who could be "at risk" and vulnerable to emotional hurt. Because the incidence of men with same sex attraction is probably at least twice that of women with SSA, the relationship between fathers and sons will always deserve special consideration. Dr. Joseph Nicolosi from the National Association for Research & Therapy of Homosexuality speaks of the absence of "shared delight" in the childhood and adolescence of men with SSA, the mutual and regular enjoyment of some activity or experience between a boy and his father that is otherwise part of normal childhood. For example, many men with SSA lack hand-eye coordination and as a result were spurned or the subject of jokes by their fathers or the neighborhood boys because they could not play certain sports easily. Quite simply, if a boy cannot throw a football very well, there are many other things that he and his dad can do and enjoy together . . . but the initiative must be the father's.

At the same time, a mother who is overly involved in the life of her son, especially if she demeans the father in the eyes of the boy or tries to make her son into a surrogate husband, will likely do harm to the development of the boy's masculinity.

That the Catholic Church teaches that homosexual *activity* (as distinguished from the inclination) is gravely immoral is widely known, but perhaps not widely understood. Perhaps it can be explained this way. Moral philosopher J. Budziszewski writes that as individuals, we are "blessedly incomplete", which is another way of saying that we are made for others. In the case of spousal or conjugal love, the union of man and woman in "one flesh" begins with the complementarity of the sexes, namely, that man

is made for woman and woman for man. This complementarity is physical, of course, but it is also emotional, psychological, and spiritual. Through their self-giving union of minds, hearts, souls and bodies, the spouses first *transcend* themselves, and then their love becomes incarnate—or transcendent—in a child. This is nature’s plan for marriage and sexual love.

It is a short step from separating procreation from marriage to separating sexual activity from marriage, and then another short step to separating sexual activity from nature’s design. The widespread rejection of the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*, which simply expresses the natural order for sexual love, explains the ambivalence of many Catholics toward the Church’s teaching on homosexual activity or same sex unions.

Neither our genes nor our environment makes us do anything, and therein lies reason for hope. A frequent temptation to

anger, for instance, does not mean that someone must yield to or indulge that prompting. St. Paul assures us that “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom 5:20). Grace, perseverance, love and the help of a therapist with a sound Christian anthropology can transform the hearts of those with SSA. When Jesus says that the “truth will make you free” (Jn 8:31), He is not so much imparting a theological principle as reminding us what it means to be human. We need humility to recognize truth, and we need the virtue of courage to live it. Freedom, strengthened and purified by grace, makes it possible for any of us to turn the wounds and thorns of life into the path to joy.

Regrettably, many people think that all that the Catholic Church offers to men and women with same sex attraction is the word “no”. Like all good mothers, the Church does say “no” to the self-destructive and

counterfeit pleasure of sin, out of a sense of love for her children. Yet that “no” is embedded in a larger “yes”, a yes to Him who is Love, and who gave Himself to the Father and to us from the Cross. The Lord asked St. Paul to find strength in his weakness through the power of the Cross. The Courage apostolate expresses that same redemptive paradox to men and women with same sex attraction and urges them to trust in what they see in the life of the Master and His apostle.

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