

## **Catechesis on Homosexuality: Making the Distinctions**

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***William Newton helps catechists to think about the categories that need to be used in order to present the Church's understanding of homosexuality and same sex unions.***

In passing on the faith, or in helping people deepen their understanding of it, the Church's vision of human sexuality must obviously be addressed. Such catechesis aims first of all at extolling the blessings of sexuality, especially in its relation to marriage, but should, the Church tells us, 'provide a good context within which to deal with the question of homosexuality.'

Aside from the understandable fear of touching upon this issue, given the charged atmosphere that surrounds it at present, there is also the difficulty that the arguments involved have a certain complexity. Here, I will attempt to unpack some of the Church's argumentation in such a way to make them clear and, I hope, communicable. The key to this, it seems to me, is to have clarity about a set of three distinctions. Once these are understood, the compelling logic of the Church's position comes to light. The three distinctions are: the distinction between act, inclination, and person; between tolerance and promotion; and between private and common good.

### **Act, Inclination, and Person**

The distinction between homosexual acts, homosexual inclination, and the person who is homosexual is crucial for making a true and fair moral assessment of homosexuality. We must hold together three truths: first, homosexual *acts* are objectively sinful; second, homosexual *inclination* is disordered, but not objectively sinful, and; third, all unfair discrimination against homosexual *persons* is to be condemned.

The most delicate and difficult part of presenting the Church's teaching on homosexuality is explaining why the Church cannot approve of homosexual sex. This is difficult because modern society does not understand the meaning of sex, period. Homosexual sex is wrong, according to the Church, because it cannot achieve the purpose of sexual intercourse. The first purpose of sex is procreation. Sexual intercourse is the use of our procreative or generative power. The procreative power, unleashed in sexual intercourse, is for the sake of procreation, and to use it in a way that disrespects this is to misuse it. This axiom applies to all the powers which are under our control. So, for example, we can use our power of communication to communicate the truth, or to deceive: one is a good use, the other a misuse. In fact, a special responsibility is attached to the procreative power because God is more involved in this power than any other. For the procreative power to achieve its purpose, God must intervene or cooperate with the couple in a special way, namely to infuse the immortal soul that comes from him alone. One might say, he has a special interest in the use of this power, and we have, thereby, a special obligation. This applies to other potential misuses of our procreative power, such

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as masturbation or sterilized heterosexual sex, and not just homosexuality. The Church's teaching on homosexuality is not a special teaching but a continuation of what she says about the meaning of sex generally. It is really not surprising that so many people do not understand the Church's opposition to homosexual sex, because the culture of contraception has severed any connection between sex and procreation in the minds of most people.

The second purpose of sex is communion. Here there is more common ground, or so it seems, between the Church and modern society, since both might agree (perhaps using different words) that sex is about self-donation and union. But even here, if we scratch below the surface, there is a profound difference. The difference is that the Church denies that homosexual sex can be an authentic moment of personal self giving and unity, because the giving and receiving that is part of sexual intercourse and sexual communion presupposes sexual difference. In sexual intercourse *personal* communion is achieved by way of a *physical* communion, since the body is an integral part of the person. So, where there is no true bodily union – a becoming 'one flesh' – there is no personal union. Moreover, part of the gift of self made in sexual intercourse is the unique gift of a woman's procreative power to the man and *visa versa*. In neither case, can persons of the same sex achieve this giving and this union by means of sex.

Sacred scripture is clear in its condemnation of homosexual sex, and for some that is sufficient and decisive (Lv 18:22, 20:13; 1 Cor 6:9, 1 Tim 1:10). Nonetheless, it is fruitful to ask why the Bible condemns it. The Church notes that 'to chose someone of the same sex for one's sexual activity is to annul the rich symbolism and meaning . . . of the Creator's sexual design.' This 'rich symbolism' is at the heart of God's self revelation to man, since human sexuality, and moreover sexual difference, is perhaps *the* way that God has chosen to reveal his relationship with mankind: in the Old Covenant God reveals himself as the jealous husband of Israel, his unfaithful bride (cf. Hos. 1-3; Jer. 2). In the New Testament, God-become-man reveals himself as this very Bridegroom (cf. Jn 3:29, Mk 2:19, Rev. 19:7, 9). In addition, a deeper reflection of the biblical accounts of creation have led to a growing recognition that sexual difference is a constitutive part of what it means to be created in the image of God (Gn 1:27). This is a central point of John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*. The implications of this truth and a clearer articulation of its significance for homosexuality are the subject of intense theological study.

In making a fair moral assessment of homosexual sex, it must be remembered that while always *objectively* sinful, these acts are not *personally* blameworthy when the individual is sincerely ignorant of their disordered nature. Of course, this does not mean that people should be left in their ignorance! The moral life is more than avoiding sin, it is a call to human maturity and this is only achieved by embracing what is truly good.

Finally, it is worth remembering that sexual sin is *not* the worst kind of sin. In fact, since sins can be ranked in gravity on the basis of the virtue they oppose, and since temperance is the lowest of the cardinal virtues, sins against temperance (which include sexual sins) are less grave than those against justice, such as theft and lying: 'sexual morality,

therefore, is neither the only nor the primary moral issue that involves the person.’ If this is the case, why is the Church so ‘hung up’ on sexual sin? Why not just go along with the prevailing attitudes in western society and have done with all this confrontation? The answer is that more is at issue than the question of different forms of sex, there are deep anthropological truths at stake. Human sexuality, written as it is into human nature, is meant to reveal to each man and woman their vocation to self-gift, communion, and fruitfulness. A mistake about the meaning of sexuality is a mistake about the purpose of life.

Turning now from homosexual *acts* to homosexual *inclination*, the *Catechism* speaks of ‘deep-seated homosexual tendencies’ which are not sinful but ‘objectively disordered.’ Sin is something chosen, something willed. So, homosexual inclination – understood as a sexual orientation or attraction towards persons of the same sex – cannot be a sin, as long as it is not chosen or fostered. Yet it can still be morally evaluated and, since it inclines a person to a form of sexual intercourse that can never be good, it must be said to be disordered.

Of course, the sexual *desires* of a heterosexual person can also be disordered, when they incline a person to sexual immorality, such as fornication or adultery. The *difference*, however, is that heterosexual inclination can find a legitimate outlet, namely chaste marital sexual intercourse, while homosexual inclination cannot. What is the *same*, however, is that the desires that arise from both heterosexual and homosexual orientation need to be brought under the control of reason, by the virtue of chastity. In this sense, the Church is not placing on homosexual persons any demand that it does not likewise place on heterosexuals. What definitely needs to be avoided is the demeaning attitude that sexual impulses are so strong in people that they are unable to control themselves sexually. To say so is to fail to recognize ‘the fundamental liberty which characterizes the human person and gives him his dignity’; a dignity that must ‘be recognized as belonging to the homosexual person as well.’ The Church (alone) upholds the dignity of homosexual persons by calling them to chastity.

It should be noted that the *Catechism* says this inclination is often *deep-seated*. This is not the same as saying the inclination is innate. To say it is innate would mean that a person was born with it and that it is part of their personal make up. It is perhaps true that there are physiological factors that make it more likely that a person will have homosexual tendencies, but much still depends on the experiences of the individual, especially in childhood. The die is not cast at conception, and this means, also, that it is not so much a part of a person that it can never be changed. If a homosexual inclination were part of the personal identity of an individual then to say it is disordered would be to say that the person was corrupted at their very core. Moreover, in such cases denying a person the right to homosexual sex would be tantamount to denying them the right to personal fulfillment.

### **Tolerance and Promotion**

If we consider how a society might treat the question of homosexuality, there is a range of possibilities. At one extreme there is the criminalization of homosexual sex, at the other, making homosexual unions equivalent to marriage. In between these – and moving from criminalization to equivalence – there is tolerance, laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, and, finally, giving homosexual couples legal status that is still somehow below the status of marriage.

The first question that arises is, given the Church's negative moral assessment of homosexual sex, should it be a criminal offence? The answer is no, not necessarily. The Church accepts the possibility of a policy of tolerance. The principle of tolerance was clearly articulated more than a century ago by Leo XIII when he said:

[W]hile not conceding any right to anything save what is true and honest, [the Church] . . . does not forbid public authority to tolerate what is at variance with truth and justice, for the sake of avoiding some greater evil, or of obtaining or preserving some greater good.

Applying this principle to homosexuality, we might argue that criminalizing homosexual sex would perhaps bring about other evils, as it did in the past, such as blackmail and entrapment. Moreover, toleration (and so decriminalization of homosexual sex) might help to preserve 'some greater good,' namely the correct character of the State which generally ought not to become too concerned with the private lives of individuals. To put this in another way, the civil law is narrower than the moral law and it is not appropriate, nor healthy, for the State to make laws that prohibit every thing prohibited by moral law. If it did, the State would be intolerably intrusive in the lives of individuals. Hence, there are no civil laws against masturbation or fornication even though these, like homosexual sex, are immoral.

However, the Church is clear: toleration must never become *promotion* of what is wrong. Here, then, the Church parts company with a more vague interpretation of tolerance. Tolerance, in truth, means leaving these private acts in private, and this necessitates a certain vigilance unless tolerance silently slips into promotion. Tolerance, therefore, does not mean treating homosexual sex as equivalent to heterosexual sex and, for example, allowing (let alone compelling) schools to teach this as part of their curriculum. This would be promotion not tolerance, as the Church understands it.

As we have noted, between tolerance and making homosexual unions equivalent to marriage, there is the question of anti-discrimination laws. What can we say about these? Should a Christian hotel owner be able to refuse to accept openly homosexual guests in his hotel? Is it legitimate for a Catholic school to consider as pertinent the sexual orientation of an applicant to a teaching post, in evaluating his application?

Clearly, since all human beings are essentially equal, a person should not be excluded, because they are homosexual, from what is due to them as a human being, such as health care provision, housing, or the opportunity to work. If it were really the case that homosexual persons are impeded in realizing these basic human rights, then the law

needs to protect them.

However, the anti-discrimination legislation that is coming on stream at present goes beyond this and gives exaggerated rights that betray not so much a concern for individuals but the *promotion* of a homosexual life style. Sexual orientation is not necessarily ‘public’ like race, age, and sex. It is not usually manifest, unless a person chooses to reveal it. If sexual orientation was to remain a private issue – as tolerance correctly understood demands – then the need for these anti-discriminatory laws becomes less evident, because an employer, for example, would not know the sexual orientation of a job applicant, and so it would not be an issue. The fact is that these anti-discriminatory laws seem to go hand in hand with a desire to make homosexuality a publically recognized and acceptable life style, in a word, to promote it.

But the sneaking suspicion remains. Does not the concept of human rights demand these anti-discriminatory laws? First, we need to remember that age, sex, and race are different from homosexual orientation since they are not disordered. Therefore, to lump them together is false, perhaps disingenuous. Further, despite the common misconception, human rights are *not* absolute. We are so accustomed to speak about the inviolable nature of human rights, we sometimes overlook this. Yet a moment of reflection will remind us that society often limits the rights of individuals for the sake of the good of the whole society: for example, a criminal’s right to freedom of movement is limited by imprisonment, for the good of society. Of course, homosexual orientation is not a crime nor is it necessarily even chosen, but it is a disorder and society also rightly limits rights in such cases, for example the right of persons with contagious diseases to free association, the right of the poor sighted to drive, or the right of a mentally disabled person to marry.

It is also important to remember that human rights are hierarchical. The most fundamental right is the right to life, since all other rights presuppose this. But the highest right is the right to religious freedom because it protects the ultimate goal of human life, communion with God. So, we can be sure that some thing has gone seriously wrong in the concept of human rights when laws giving rights on the basis of homosexual orientation undermine the right to religious freedom; as is the case in the above examples of the Christian hotel owner and the Catholic school. Religious freedom is a great common good and the rights of homosexual persons to certain forms of employment or services are rightly limited in these cases. It is not, as some have claimed, an ill judged *concession* made by a government pandering to the religious vote or wilting under the pressure of the religious lobby, it is the government living up to its civil *obligation*!

### **Common Good and Private Good**

This brings us, then, to the final point. The reason for political authority, its *raison d’etre*, is the promotion of the common good not the promotion of private goods. If it fails in this, it fails, period! Now, the family built on marriage is absolutely necessary for the good of society. It alone gives the context for the wholesome procreation and upbringing of citizens: in the words of Vatican II, it is ‘the first and vital cell of society.’

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Therefore, if the State fails to promote marriage (and family life built on marriage) it fails in its first and primary duty!

Homosexual unions do not serve society in the same way as marriage. They cannot naturally be procreative and they do not have the sexual complementarity needed to create the proper environment for raising children. To make such unions equivalent to marriage is to lower the special esteem a society must have towards marriage if it is to prosper. Law forms attitudes, as we know in the case of abortion and euthanasia. A law that gives equivalence to same sex unions communicates that marriage is nothing special, and people, especially the young, will start to relate to it in this way. But this is disastrous for the stability of any society. When a government acts in this way, it acts contrary to its purpose and undermines itself and the society; it ‘acts arbitrarily and in contradiction with its duties.’

In saying that homosexual unions do not contribute to the common good, the Church is not ‘getting at’ homosexuals because it says exactly the same thing about ‘de facto’ unions, more familiarly known as cohabitation. These kinds of union are built explicitly on a refusal to make the commitment so necessary for the good of children and the stability of society. They are private arrangements that do not serve society like marriage and so should not reap the benefits that society can offer. They are unions entered into only for the private good of the partners, and not for the common good. Accordingly, they like homosexual unions, do not warrant public affirmation and benefits.

Some, however, while really seeing the special service rendered by marriage to society, are troubled by the sense that by denying homosexual unions the same status as marriage they are being *unjust*. Here, another distinction comes to our aid! Justice is two-faced, so to speak. On the one hand – and this is what we are more familiar with – it demands that we treat equal things equally. The flip-side of this is that justice also demands that we treat unequal things unequally. Clearly, then, if marriage makes a unique contribution to society, then, to treat other things that do not as equivalent is an injustice to marriage.

### **Conclusion**

What then is the duty incumbent on the faithful in this area? First, it is to patiently and humbly explain – in and out of season (2 Tim 4:2) – why the Church teaches what she does about human sexuality. This means understanding the important distinctions that I have tried to explain here. The heart of the matter is to communicate that human sexuality, understood as the power to be a parent, is necessarily given to us for the common good. It is a curious phenomenon (one might say a paradox) that as sex becomes less and less of a taboo subject, as it comes evermore out of the privacy of the bedroom and into the public sphere, it becomes more and more a private affair! Sexuality has lost its other-orientation, especially its relationship to society and to God. Sexuality is seen increasingly only in terms of personal preference and fulfillment. Explaining the ‘social dimension of sex’ is critical. The second thing to be done, especially given the difficulty of getting anyone to listen to this truth in the present climate, is to live this truth in joy and generosity. Christian couples and families need to demonstrate the beauty and joy of this teaching. To resurrect the original meaning of the word, they need to be more gay than others.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Congregation For The Doctrine Of The Faith, *Letter To The Bishops Of The Catholic Church On The Pastoral Care Of Homosexual Persons*, 17.

<sup>2</sup> What I have to say here can be found directly and clearly expressed by the Church's *Magisterium*. The most important sources are the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2357-2359) and three documents from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, namely: [Declaration On Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics, Persona Humana](#), (29 December 1975); [Letter To The Bishops Of The Catholic Church On The Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons, Homosexualitatis Problema](#) (1 October 1986); *Some Considerations Concerning The Response To Legislative Proposals On Non-Discrimination Of Homosexual Persons* (23 July 1992), and; [Considerations Regarding Proposals To Give Legal Recognition To Unions Between Homosexual Persons](#) (31 July 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Livio Melina, 'Homosexual Inclination As An 'Objective Disorder': Reflections Of Theological Anthropology,' *Communio* 25 (Spring 1998).

<sup>4</sup> '[A]ccording to the objective moral order, homosexual relations are acts which lack an essential and indispensable finality' (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Persona Humana*, 8); 'They close the sexual act to the gift of life' (CCC 2357).

<sup>5</sup> Livio Melina, 'Moral Criteria For Evaluating Homosexuality' in *L'Osservatore Romano* (English Edition) 11 June 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Congregation For The Doctrine Of The Faith, *Letter To The Bishops Of The Catholic Church On The Pastoral Care Of Homosexual Persons*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> See, Angelo Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, trans. Michelle Borrás, (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 12.

<sup>8</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 63.

<sup>9</sup> Archbishop Dionigi Tettamanzi, 'Homosexuality In The Context Of Christian Anthropology,' *L'Osservatore Romano* (English Edition), 12 March 1997.

<sup>10</sup> CCC, 2358.

<sup>11</sup> Congregation For The Doctrine Of The Faith, *Letter To The Bishops Of The Catholic Church On The Pastoral Care Of Homosexual Persons*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> The first editions of the Catechism in English (1992) used the word 'innate' but this was changed to 'deep seated/rooted' (*profunde radicata*s) in the official Latin edition of 1997.

<sup>13</sup> Jeffery Keefe, 'Key Aspects Of Homosexuality,' in *The Truth About Homosexuality*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 31-67.

<sup>14</sup> In light of the fact that homosexual tendency is deep-seated but not innate, the term 'homosexual person' is rather unfortunate, since *persons* could only be homosexual if the tendency was innate. Of course, even the word homosexual is misleading since it implies that sexuality is neutral and can be realized in one of two equally valid ways, expressed by the pre-fixes hetero or homo.

<sup>15</sup> Leo XIII, *Libertas Praestantissimum*, 33.

<sup>16</sup> John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 71.

<sup>17</sup> This is not to say that a government cannot make laws about sexual morality. The question to be asked is whether the morality in question touches upon the common good. So, for example, adultery in some states is illegal because it is deemed, with some reason, as anti-social behavior. Nonetheless, a state might legitimately decide that homosexual sex is not of itself a matter of public interest. It might, therefore, be decriminalized and tolerated.

<sup>18</sup> Congregation For The Doctrine of the Faith, *Some Considerations Concerning the Response to Legislative Proposals on Non-discrimination of Homosexual Persons*, 13-14.

<sup>19</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Some Considerations Concerning the Response to Legislative Proposals on Non-discrimination of Homosexual Persons*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 47.

<sup>21</sup> Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 74.

<sup>22</sup> Vatican II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Some Considerations Concerning The Response To Legislative Proposals On Non-discrimination of Homosexual Persons*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Pontifical Council for the Family, *Marriage, Family, and 'De Facto' Unions*.

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