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Called to Faithfulness: The Church and Homosexual Conduct

Introduction

In 1978 the XV General Synod of the Polish National Catholic Church (PNCC) unanimously approved a paper entitled "The Polish National Catholic Church and the Homosexual Question."[1] The text supplied a brief survey of the causes of this condition and the applicable teachings of the Old and New Testaments, which regard homosexual conduct as inherently sinful. The key recommendations of the paper stipulated that the PNCC (1) "View the continued illicit homosexual relationship as a sinful state not in keeping with God's natural order"; (2) "Not accept the premise of the homosexual lifestyle as viable for Christians"; and (3) "Prohibit the conferral of Holy Orders on any avowed and practicing homosexual." At the same time, the text admonished Polish National Catholics not "to condemn or to separate" homosexual persons but rather to help them attain "substantial healing" through "prayer, professional assistance, counseling, worship and sincere supportive Christian fellowship . . . ."

The Current Situation

Since 1978 the recognition of homosexual conduct as an acceptable "lifestyle" has proceeded apace in Western society, and organized groups of homosexual persons have openly and often successfully campaigned for recognition by civil authorities of their "rights" and demands, one of which is acceptance of homosexual conduct as no different from heterosexual conduct. Some researchers have sought to support this with claims that homosexuality has a biological foundation and hence that homosexual conduct is not a matter of free choice. To a significant extent, this development reflects an increased materialism and hedonism that either explicitly or implicitly denies the transcendent nature of human beings and their supernatural vocation to union with God through obedience and conformity to his will. This negative phenomenon, in turn, has

[1] See *Proceedings of the XV General Synod of the Polish National Catholic Church* ([Scranton], n.p., n.d.), p. 232.

led to a relativization of morality and the belief that sexual ethics stem purely from cultural factors and can be altered at will either by the consensus of a majority in a given society or institution or even by individuals themselves. Indeed, notwithstanding the constant teaching of Scripture and Tradition that the use of the sexual faculty is morally good *only* when exercised within the context of a marriage between one man and one woman, even some churches and ecclesial communities have, to a greater or lesser extent, come to regard homosexual conduct as either morally neutral or morally good. The most visible recent manifestation of this in some ecclesiastical circles is the "blessing" of homosexual "unions" or "partnerships." The external similarity of such a "blessing" to a wedding ceremony suggests that, in the opinion of these circles, there is no ethical difference between heterosexual conduct and homosexual conduct.

In light of these developments and to preclude any uncertainty or confusion about this subject in the minds of the faithful, the Church Doctrine Commission (CDC) deems it expedient to reaffirm the basic teachings contained in the 1978 synodal paper and to restate the fundamental principles upon which those teachings are grounded. While the Church remains committed to respecting the intrinsic value and dignity of every person, regardless of his or her sexual "orientation," and consequently deplores acts of physical violence directed at homosexual persons due solely to this "orientation," it nonetheless regards it as essential to remain true to its call to faithfulness—a faithfulness to God's revelation of his will for humankind as reflected in Scripture and Tradition. This call to faithfulness applies not only to the Church as an institution but also to each and every one of its members.

The Scriptural Witness

There can be little doubt that both the Old and the New Testaments regard homosexual acts as intrinsically disordered because they run counter to God's plan for his creatures, male and female, and their mutual relations.[2] Both Testaments explicitly condemn homosexual acts as deeds of grave depravity. Attempts by some exegetes to redefine the "sin of Sodom" as a lack of "hospitality" rather than an intention to assault Lot's angelic guests[3] remain unconvincing, particularly in light of other Old Testament proscriptions against homosexual behavior.[4]

The New Testament, above all the Pauline Letters, restates these condemnations, albeit in a different manner, for the possibility of redemption through repentance of this sin—as indeed all others--always exists.[5] Indeed, unfaithfulness to God's will in matters of sexual conduct, whether heterosexual (i.e., adultery and fornication) or homosexual, is linked to apostasy and idolatry.[6]

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[2]Cf. *Genesis*, 2: 18-25.
[3]Cf. *Genesis*, 19: 1-11.
[4]Cf. *Leviticus*, 18:22, 20:13.
[5]Cf. *1 Corinthians*, 6:9; *1 Timothy*, 1:10.
[6]Cf. *Romans*, 1:18-32. For a detailed discussion of the scriptural *data*, see Robert A.J. Gagnon, "Scripture on Homosexuality," *Zenit*, 21 and 28 March 2002.

The Patristic Witness

The Church Fathers of both the East and West, faithful to scriptural teachings on the intrinsically disordered nature of homosexual conduct, regarded such behavior as morally reprehensible. True, they often considered this subject within the context of discussions of pedophilia or ephebophilia.[7] But they also condemned homosexual conduct between adult males and between adult females.[8] Their line of argument did not depend solely, or even largely, upon the aversion they felt towards homosexual acts. Indeed, some of the Fathers recognized that the intrinsically evil character of homosexual conduct stemmed from the fact that it was unnatural—i.e., that it contradicted the natural purpose of sexual intercourse, which was the procreation of children.

John Chrysostom, for example, regarded homosexual behavior, whether practiced by either men or women, as "an insult to nature itself."[9] And St. Augustine described homosexual conduct as "shameful acts against nature" that "ought everywhere and always to be detested and punished," because "God . . . has not made men so that they should use one another in this way."[10]

The concept of homosexual behavior as abhorrent precisely because it contradicted nature—specifically Natural Law—as well as Divine Law received detailed treatment in the writings of Thomas Aquinas. According to Aquinas, "Just as the ordering of right reason proceeds from man, so the order of nature is from God Himself: wherefore in sins contrary to nature, whereby the very order of nature is violated, an injury is done to God, the Author of nature." Hence, "since by the unnatural vices man transgresses that which has been determined by nature with regard to the use of venereal actions, it follows that in this matter this sin is gravest of all."[11]

A Crucial Distinction

Implicit in the scriptural and patristic treatment of homosexuality is a distinction between homosexual "orientation" and conduct. This key distinction has become more explicit in recent consideration of this subject and has reflected the insights of contemporary psychology and

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[7]See, e.g., *Didache*, 2:2; *Letter of Barnabas*, 10; Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 27; Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Greeks*, 2; John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Titus*, 5, and *Homilies on Matthew*, 3:3.

[8]Eusebius of Caesarea, *Proof of the Gospel*, 4:10; Basil the Great, *Letters*, 217:62; John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, 4.

[9]*Homilies on Romans*, 4.

[10]*Confessions*, 3:8:15.

[11]*Summa Theologica*, Second Part of the Second Part, Treatise on Fortitude and Temperance, Q. 154 (Of the Parts of Lust).

biology, which have sought to identify the causes of this phenomenon. Though these studies remain inconclusive—and those which postulate biological or genetic roots remain unproved—there can be little doubt that, in many if not most cases, homosexual persons have not consciously chosen this "orientation."[12] While homosexual inclinations represent a moral disorder, they do not constitute a sin *per se*. Homosexual persons, like all other human beings, retain their free will, and they commit a grave (mortal) sin only when they act upon these inclinations and engage in homosexual conduct, rather than maintain that form of chastity to which all unmarried Christians are called.

The Church's Response: A Call to Faithfulness

Given the clear teachings of Scripture and Tradition, the Church cannot in any way approve of or condone homosexual conduct. Some, perhaps, may object that such a stance, in this day and age, is not "pastoral," for it presumes to make a judgment that a homosexual "lifestyle" is wrong because it is inconsistent with Christian sexual ethics and morality. However, a genuinely pastoral approach to this moral disorder—as indeed to any other ethical problem, such as adultery or fornication among heterosexual persons—requires that the Church uphold the truth. The Church would fail in its duty if it either explicitly or implicitly agreed to call something "good" that is inherently evil. For this reason, the CDC categorically rejects and deplores the ecclesiastical "blessing" of homosexual "unions" or "partnerships." Churches and ecclesial communities that have adopted this practice not only act in a way that is inconsistent with Christian morality but also seriously complicate efforts to promote Christian unity, for their action constitutes a grave obstacle to the establishment of full communion.

At the same time, the Church's rejection of homosexual conduct does *not* represent a rejection of homosexual persons. They, like all others, stand in need of God's grace, forgiveness, and healing when they have sinned. The Church offers them this, above all through the Sacraments of Penance (Reconciliation) and the Holy Eucharist, and remains ready to assist them as they bear their cross in a world where the practice of virtues such as chastity, self-denial, and the acceptance of Christian faith and morals have become increasingly difficult.

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[12]For a survey of the scientific literature on homosexuality, see Fr. Bartholomew Kiely, "Christian Anthropology and Homosexuality--Antecedents of Homosexuality: Science and Moral Evaluation," *L'Osservatore Romano* (English Edition), 12 March 1997.