

PASTORAL STATEMENT

Homosexuality and the Roman Catholic Church

May 21, 1999

MY HEART CRIES OUT when it beholds scenes like the recent one at Saint Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. That scene was the inter-religious prayer service prior to the conferral of the Ellis Island Medal of Honor this past May 8. There, in the sanctuary, ten ministers of various traditions led us in prayer and reflection. Eight of the ten were Christian. And, I could not help but wonder how God's people could have gotten to this state of division.

One needs only to reflect on history in order to get an answer. There, one discovers that, more times than not, divisions have occurred over the perception that one had a greater fullness of the truth than the other. It should not be surprising to find that disagreements in the Church began early in its history. One of Satan's most effective ploys is to sow dissension within the Body of Christ.

In one portion of this Diocesan Church, Catholic Christians have taken out ads and written letters to the editor in what appears to be a disagreement among them. It is unfortunate that the various accusations have been carried into the public forum. This not only is inappropriate in accord with our Church's tradition but is the cause of scandal, as well. Not one of us can claim to have the whole truth, for we are pilgrims on journey. The Church as God's Household, however, can and does. There would be no dissension and there could be no division if we all accepted the whole truth rather than fragment it to serve our own perspectives.

The issue has to do with sexual life style and an appropriate response on the part of the Church. Actually, they are separate issues. Yet, reality often commingles issues and even confuses them.

Paragraphs 2357, 2358, and 2359 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church provide all the guidance that is needed in regard to this matter. In that first paragraph, the Catechism says the following: "Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that 'homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.'" As is stated there, under no circumstances can they be approved. Please note that it is speaking of "acts".

Persons who identify themselves as "gay" or "lesbian" often give the message that they themselves act out or support the "right" of others to act out in a sexual manner with individuals of their own sex. Roman Catholics may not ever consider such activity appropriate. This we base on grounds that are scriptural, moral, and natural. Consequently, there do not exist the "rights" as associated with groups whose identity is

based on scriptural, moral, or natural grounds (such as religion, ethnicity, race, or family). There do exist, however, the "rights" associated with a person's dignity as having been created by God.

The second paragraph speaks of our response to such individuals. It recognizes that homosexuality can be an inclination "propensio", even though disordered, objectively speaking. And, it reminds us that they "must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity." The Church's teaching is that "every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided." They, too, are called to fulfill God's will in their lives. The Catechism takes note of the fact that the number of men and women who have a homosexual orientation is not negligible.

The third paragraph challenges persons of homosexual orientation to the same Christian perfection to which all of us are called. They have the right to receive pastoral care and to participate in the sacramental life of the Church. In that way, they are to be assisted in striving to live a chaste life.

It is the right of the Church to teach through its Bishops. The Bishops have a duty to do so, in union with the Bishop of Rome, the Pope. That is the reason why the Bishops of the United States issued, through one of their committees, a teaching in regard to homosexuality. "Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers" is, in its clarified version, confirmed to be without error by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and is consistent with its own document on the subject. It would be well for those in the current public discussion to read that document and to reflect on its authentic teaching. Rejecting its teaching, and that of the Bishops, would be indicative of choosing a particular agenda rather than accepting the Church's teaching in its entirety.

Among other things, the Bishops' pastoral message reminds us that there is no contradiction between accepting the full truth of God's revelation about the dignity of the human person and the meaning of human sexuality. Actually, we may not deny one in favor of the other. Both are part and parcel of the Church's teaching.

All that I have said above should be quite clear. No doubt, it is also acceptable to all good-intentioned members of the Roman Catholic Church. It is when we question the intent of others that we run the risk of compromising our witness to the truth. Also, the misunderstanding of certain terms as to their meaning can, and all too often does, cause hurt and even dissension. Cardinal George Basil Hume's counsel may be helpful in this regard.

He speaks of the fact that certain terminology sounds harsh in English. It is important to remember that the Church needs to be precise in its documents, using words that can be difficult to translate in accord with the particular nuance intended. "Objective disorder", as found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, sounds harsh on the part of a loving Church to individuals who find themselves in a homosexual orientation. Therefore, it is good to remember that the term belongs "to the vocabulary of traditional Catholic moral

theology and philosophy" and is "used to describe an inclination which is a departure from what is generally regarded as the norm." The Cardinal explains what all Catholic Christians should already know and accept: a homosexual person is neither morally good nor morally bad, it is homosexual genital acts that are morally wrong.

Cardinal Hume's "Note on Church Teaching Concerning Homosexual People" is another document that is helpful in understanding the whole of the Church's teaching on homosexuality. It would be well for those in the current public discussion to read that statement, as well.

Violence, threats, and disrespect have no place in a Christian's life. They may never be a part of the process of defending truth and combating error. The Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith's 1986 letter to us Bishops states it very clearly.

"It is deplorable that homosexual persons have been and are the object of violence in speech or in action. Such treatment deserves condemnation from the Church's pastors wherever it occurs. It reveals a kind of disregard for others, which endangers the most fundamental principles of a healthy society. The intrinsic dignity of each person must always be respected in word, in action and in law" (PC,10).

This dual aspect of a single teaching presents a unique challenge to pastoral ministers, be they ordained or not. It is the mission of Christ and his Church (and, therefore, theirs) to teach God's intent for those whom He brought into being and loves. It is the mission of Christ and his Church (and, therefore, theirs) to reach out in understanding and forgiveness, with respect and without violence. When such witness is given authentically, it frequently gets misinterpreted.

Public dissension has never served the Church well. The Church's teachings are clear. Those who have the right and the duty to interpret those teachings have done so. Individual interpretations, more often than not, serve a personal agenda and not the overall mission of Christ and his Church. Why should not my heart cry out again as I reflect on the current exchange of public statements. In regard to that situation and to make matters as clear as I, the Bishop of this Diocesan Church, can make them, I state the following:

1. The Roman Catholic Church considers homosexual acts wrong. This the Church holds, based on an understanding of Christ's teaching as handed down to us by his Apostles and their successors (Rom 1:26-27).
2. At the same time, the Church understands that homosexuality can be an inclination that is deep-seated.
3. A homosexual person is to receive pastoral care in the same way and to the same degree as any other member of the Church. Through such care, he or she is encouraged and sustained in striving for Christian perfection.

4. In imitation of Christ and as an expression of his love, the faith community is to accept homosexual persons with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Violence (attitudinal, verbal, or physical) can never be an option. When it occurs, it is to be condemned by those who pastor in the Church. That does not mean that the Church is changing Christ's teaching and approving inappropriate life styles.

5. In accord with the Church's teaching, partners of the same sex living together cannot be considered in the same light as a heterosexual married couple, nor should one speak of the same rights and benefits.

6. All of us find ourselves in need of salvation. As sinners and in debt to the Lord, we are called upon to be forgiving of each other. In this way, we can hope for God's love and forgiveness in our own lives [Mt 18:21-35]. Such loving forgiveness is the very mission of the Church.

Some would claim that I have kept silent in the midst of the debate. I have not. There abound enough statements in which I have played a part as a Bishop of the Church. That includes the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, I issue this pastoral statement with the hope that the faithful of our Diocesan Church will find in it guidance for their journey into the Reign of God.



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