

# HOMOSEXUALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

## Introduction

The problem of homosexuality seems complex, as does any problem concerning man, and concerning him in depth: many different and difficult aspects are connected with it. This complexity seems to reveal that unique richness that marks the human person, who often is correctly described as a "mystery." On the other hand, it is precisely this very "mystery" that spurs the reflection on homosexuality towards a reading and interpretation marked by simplicity, within a deeply unified vision. And it is again the unique richness of the human person that demands such a unified vision: the wealth proper to the person is, in fact, not chaotic but intrinsically ordered.

Thus, for an adequate and fruitful reflection on homosexuality, it is a question of keeping it within an anthropological context, more precisely, within the context of Christian anthropology, which interprets man in the light of God's Word and right reason. For such an interpretation of man, we must go back "to the beginning", that is, to God's creative act. This is what Jesus Christ did with regard to the indissolubility of marriage, offering a valid paradigmatic principle for the whole truth about man, and so for human sexuality. Indeed, sexuality is *human* precisely because *it belongs to and is for the person*; it is not an independent reality but is related to the person. Another of Christ's sayings is enlightening: man was not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath for man (cf. Mark 2:27). It is a saying that also sheds light on the relationship between sexuality and *the person: the person was not made for sexuality, but sexuality for the person.*

## The Primacy Of The Person Over Sexuality

The general assertion just made needs more careful analysis: in all questions regarding human sexuality - thus homosexuality as well - *the primacy of the person over his or her sexuality*, and concretely over the dimensions and forms, requirements, and expressions of this same sexuality, must never be forgotten but always positively affirmed.

Going back "to the beginning" is highly significant here because the text of Genesis is certainly important for affirming the primacy of the person over sexuality: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). The biblical text certainly states that sexuality is not something outside of a person or a later addition but is included in one and the same act of God the Creator: it belongs intrinsically and constitutively to the person, more on the lines of "having" than of "being". There is no person, in fact, who is not a sexual person. "Sexuality is a fundamental component of personality, one of its modes of being, of manifestation, of communicating with others, of feeling, of expressing, and of living human love. Sexuality characterizes man and woman not only on the physical level but also on the psychological and spiritual, making its mark on each of their expressions." (*Congregation for Catholic Education*, November 1, 1983, 4, 5)

On the other hand, we cannot deny that the affirmation of man as *image of God* is prior to that of man as "male and female". The person created by God, while intrinsically and constitutively including sexuality, is not fully defined by it.

As a consequence, we must pay primary, continual, and undeniable attention to the person and his primordial dignity: his "type" of sexuality, with its concrete forms of realization, never deprives the person of that basic dignity, which is inherent in his very being as a creature of God. Here we are speaking of personal dignity in the objective and ontological sense rather than the subjective and moral sense, that is, relative to moral conduct that can be defined as being in accordance with or not in accordance with the values and demands proper to one's dignity as a person.

"The human person, made in the image and likeness of God, can hardly be adequately described by a reductionist reference to his or her sexual orientation. Every one living on the face of the earth has personal problems and difficulties, but challenges to growth, strengths, talents, and gifts as well. Today, the Church provides a badly needed context for the care of the human person when she refuses to consider the person as a "heterosexual" or a "homosexual" and insists that every person has a fundamental identity: the creature of God and, by his grace, his child and heir to eternal life." (*Homosexualitatis problema*, , October 1, 1986, n. 16)

### **There Is Neither Male Nor Female**

The final words of this quotation invite us to "revisit" the affirmation of the primacy of the person over his or her sexuality *in a specifically Christian key*, according to the characteristic features of man as a "new creation in Christ", thus according to a supernatural anthropology.

The "relativity" of sexuality can be seen with particular clarity and force in Paul's Letter to the Galatians: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (3:27 & 28). As we can immediately learn from the Apostle's words, the baptized person, because he or she has "put on Christ", that is, because he or she is a new creation, "surpasses" all the "distinctions" in the temporal human order, whether ethnic (Jews and Greeks), social (slaves and free), or anthropological-sexual (male and female).

Certainly, the text must be interpreted correctly: Paul's teaching concerns the ontological newness brought about by Baptism. The Apostle refers to the being-in-Christ resulting from this sacrament and, consequently, to the equality and communion-unity of those who have received it. This equality and communion-unity are so radical that they are not compromised by any of the many "distinctions" found in the human world, nor - in a certain sense - by the sexual distinction of masculinity and femininity. In an indirect way, but no less precise and strong for all that, the primacy of the Christian person over his or her sexuality is affirmed.

## Sexuality 'In Its Place'

We should return to *the aspect of "relativity"* in order to grasp its full meaning. Its meaning is not only negative, privative, or restrictive, referring to a "no" to the "absolutizing" of sexuality, which would otherwise deny the primacy of the person as such. It is primarily a question of identifying the positive meaning of relativity: this puts *sexuality "in its place"*, without increasing or diminishing it, but defining it in terms of its specifically human "value".

Once again, the identification of this "value" comes from an understanding of the person in his or her characteristic, defining features (*logos*), in his or her basic ends (*telos*), and in his or her inner drives (*nomos*). In the light of God's Word and right reason, a person is defined as a "meaningful being", possessing his or her own *logos*, his or her own "sense". It cannot be otherwise if he or she is the fruit and living testimony of the eternal wisdom and infinite love of God the Creator. And this *logos* consists in the ability to love and be loved, to be-in-a-relationship of communion and self-giving. This *logos*, inscribed in a person's very being, results in an inner drive that orients him or her toward the fulfillment of his or her capacity for loving and being loved. This happens when the person's *telos* is achieved, that is, his or her perfection in goodness and happiness. In particular, this human drive is something "impressed" - it is the *nomos* or law inscribed in the heart of every person (cf. Romans 2:14 & 15) - and at the same time something "expressed", that is something taken up consciously and freely by the person.

Now we should move from a general statement about the "value" of the person to a particular one about the value of the person's sexuality, beginning with the basic *logos* of loving and being loved, with specific reference to the masculinity and femininity of the person. We are helped in this regard by the profound and thought-provoking "theology of the body" which John Paul II developed, especially regarding the *nuptial meaning of the human body*. As he said, for example, in his address of January 16, 1980: "The human body, with its sex, and its masculinity and femininity, seen in the very mystery of creation, is not only a source of fruitfulness and procreation, as in the whole natural order, but includes right 'from the beginning' the 'nuptial' attribute, that is *the capacity of expressing love*".

Obviously, the "capacity for love", for the nuptial love of which the Pope speaks, must be predicated not only of the person as such but also of his sexuality and, in particular, of sexuality according to the "unified totality" of the person. In this sense, the love in question presents its own *specific nature*, given by the *total gift of self to the other for the sake of a communion that is interpersonal* (unitive meaning) *and transpersonal* (procreative meaning). "In its most profound reality, love is essentially a gift; and conjugal love, while leading the spouses to the reciprocal 'knowledge' which makes them 'one flesh', does not end with the couple because it makes them capable of the greatest possible gift, the gift by which they become cooperators with God for giving life to a new human person. Thus the couple, while giving themselves to one another, give not just themselves but also the reality of children, who are a living reflection of their love, a

permanent sign of conjugal unity and a living and inseparable synthesis of their being a father and a mother." (*Familiaris consortio*, n. 14)

As you see, here we encounter the *basic ethical principle* that the Church's doctrine has constantly taught regarding sexual morality. The moral goodness of the acts proper to conjugal life, ordered according to true human dignity, "does not take only the good intentions and the evaluation of motives into account; objective criteria must be used, criteria drawn from the nature of the human person and his or her acts, criteria that respect the total meaning of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 51) "The use of the sexual function has its true meaning and moral rectitude only in true marriage" (*Declaration Persona humane*, n. 5).

Homosexuality is objectively incapable of achieving "the total meaning of mutual self-giving and human procreation". In this regard, the above-mentioned Declaration says: "According to the objective moral order, homosexual relations are acts that lack an essential and indispensable finality" (n. 8)

### **The Moral Dimension: Truth And History**

Let us now return to the anthropological discussion of sexuality, concentrating in particular on its *moral dimension*, that is, the dimension that considers the "truth" that, through the person's conscious, free action becomes "history", or in the terms mentioned above, focuses on the *logos* that is realized in view of its fulfillment (*telos*) through a person's free obedience to his or her *nomos*.

A preliminary, essential warning: in discussing ethical questions about homosexuality, a rather easy and widespread *danger must be carefully avoided*. It is the danger of forgetting that the same principles and moral evaluation apply to both heterosexuality and homosexuality. It cannot be otherwise if the point of reference is the person in his or her essential, defining features, in his or her basic ends, in his or her inner drives. It is on this common basis that one makes a moral discernment of sexuality in all its forms and expressions. From this common perspective, we offer a number of observations for a correct moral evaluation of homosexuality.

First, it must be remembered that the realm of human and Christian morality is much broader than that of sexual morality. In addition, it must be stated clearly that there is a hierarchy of values and requirements within morality: significant in this regard is the classical presentation of ethical requirements organized according to the theological and cardinal virtues. Sexual morality, therefore, is neither the only nor the primary moral issue that involves the person.

Another observation concerns the traditional distinction between sins "in accordance with" or "against" nature, since homosexuality is understood as a disorder *against nature*.

Such a distinction has a legitimate place in relation to human nature understood in an exclusively biophysical way; it has no place, however, if this nature receives a

specifically personal interpretation: in this latter sense, we cannot speak of sin *according to nature*. Precisely this personal interpretation of the natural moral law requires a broader, deeper understanding of sexual disorder, an understanding that is attentive to all the values and ethical requirements involved in it. In this sense, we must label as erroneous a certain culture that considers any heterosexual relationship "normal" as long as it has not been extorted by violence: adultery, for example, is no less sinful than homosexual relations.

There is no need here to insist on the common, universal given of responsibility-imputability, to be determined on the basis of the person's actual awareness and freedom, and thus on the basis of the weight to be given to various forms of "conditioning". This has particular importance for the moral evaluation of the homosexual condition or tendency and sexual acts.

Yet another observation concerns the person's "historicity", which is reflected in the historicity of his or her conduct. If correctly interpreted, the "law of graduality" can shed light on the moral development of the homosexual person and can be of help in making a moral evaluation according to the truth.

The person's historicity must be understood primarily against the background of that *history of salvation* in which each and every one is involved and, therefore, influenced by the *mystery of iniquity* as well as by the *mystery of salvation*. The position of each and every person is identical in relation to these *mysteries*: everyone is exposed to temptation and evil and, at the same time, to hope and goodness. "What, then, are homosexual persons to do who seek to follow the Lord? Fundamentally, they are called to enact the will of God in their life by joining whatever sufferings and difficulties they experience in virtue of their condition to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross.... It should be remembered that this is the way to eternal life for all who follow Christ.... Christians who are homosexual are called, as all of us are, to a chaste life. As they dedicate their lives to understanding the nature of God's personal call to them, they will be able to celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation more faithfully and receive the Lord's grace so freely offered in order to convert their lives more fully to his Way." (*Homosexualitatis problema*, n. 12)

### **The Contemporary Sociocultural Context**

Let me conclude with some more specifically sociocultural remarks. Certainly, everything we have been saying is in line with the truth, with a truth that by its nature is never opposed to the person's freedom and happiness but is instead its inescapable condition, according to what Christ explicitly said: "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32). In this sense, there is an inseparable connection between truth and love. And with precise regard to homosexual persons, *Homosexualitatis problema* says: "The God who is at once truth and love calls the Church to minister to every man, woman, and child with the pastoral solicitude of our compassionate Lord." (n. 13)

However, the spirit of objectivity and responsibility that should guide moral reflection on the situation of homosexual persons can in no way disregard the precise *social and cultural context* in which homosexuality is debated today. As everyone knows, this debate is taking place in the context of highly politicized demands that homosexual persons have completely equal rights, including the right to marriage, adoption, and political asylum. More broadly, it is taking place in the context of the so-called "gay culture", which adopts a homosexual "life-style" and is committed to getting this life-style accepted by society (and civil law) as fully legitimate.

In this cultural situation, the Church must exercise the greatest vigilance and take a courageous prophetic stance (cf. Isaiah 5:20); she is called, together with every person of goodwill, to denounce the very grave personal and social risks connected with accepting such a culture and to work constantly toward the moral education of people in true freedom and, thus, in authentic human social living.

--Dionigi Teltamanzi, Archbishop of Genoa, Italy, edited by Patrick J. Hession, taken from L'Osservatore Romano, March 12, 1997, p. 5.