

MORAL CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING HOMOSEXUALITY

The heated public debate on homosexuality involves different approaches to the topic that are sometimes mixed with one another and not free from confusion based on self-interest.

It is rare to find the complex psychological problems that are typical of the homosexually oriented personality distinguished from questions associated with the "gay culture" and the life-styles influenced by it. It is even harder to separate the just requirements of non-discrimination from demands for the full legalization of homosexual unions.

In this situation, the positive achievement of the due respect that should always be shown a person, who can never be identified merely by his or her sexual orientation or actions, and the discovery of the deep psychological and social influences inherent in homosexuality are confused with other cultural factors, giving rise to a growing uncertainty and virtual eclipse of the ability to determine the objective criteria for moral evaluation. The loss of the authentic normative value of human nature and the consequent subjectivization of the moral sense are associated with an erotization of the surrounding culture and an emphasis on the right to sexual pleasure that, after exalting personal freedom, paradoxically submits the individual to the determination of his or her impulses by censoring any moral demand.

In this article, we will distinguish three aspects of the problem: first, we will point out the guiding criteria for an objective moral evaluation of *homosexual acts*; then we will examine *subjective influences*, and lastly we will look at certain challenges raised by the "gay culture".

Moral Evaluation Of Homosexual Acts

The choice to begin with an *evaluation of homosexual acts* depends precisely on the moral viewpoint we adopt. To be able to express an evaluation in terms of moral good or evil, the person's free will, by which he or she determines himself or herself through the choices he or she makes, must come into play. In fact, morality is concerned with what proceeds from personal freedom, that is, those human acts that, "to the extent that they are deliberate choices, give moral definition to the very person who performs them, determining his or her profound spiritual traits." (*Veritatis splendor*, n. 71)

Homosexual acts are, thus, taken into moral consideration *insofar as they are deliberate choices* while the psychological influences on freedom are examined at a later point to the extent that they diminish the person's moral responsibility or are a challenge to it.

Like every human act, homosexual behavior must also be evaluated first of all on the basis of "objective criteria", that is, criteria drawn from the nature of the human person and of human action. It is a question of those principles of the moral order that have their origin in human nature itself and that concern a person's full development and sanctification. In fact, "acting is morally good when the choices of freedom are in conformity with a person's true good," corresponding to the wise design of God and

indicated by his commandments, which are "a path that leads to life." (*Veritatis splendor*, n. 72)

Now the moral tradition of the Church, based on the light of Revelation and natural reason, has always and unequivocally stressed that "the use of the sexual function has its true meaning and moral rectitude only in legitimate marriage." (*Persona humana*, n. 5) Human sexuality is included in that primordial and good plan of God the Creator, who called man and woman, with their reciprocal complementarity, to be an image of his own love and responsible collaborators in the procreation of new individuals. Therefore, objective meanings are inherent in the physical acts related to sexuality and represent as many calls to achieve the person's moral good. The value of the norms of conjugal morality is precisely directed to keeping the exercise of sexual acts within "the context of true love," by safeguarding "the total meaning of mutual self-giving and human procreation." (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 51)

Through the symbolism of the sexual difference that marks their bodily nature, man and woman are called to achieve two closely connected values: 1) the gift of self and the acceptance of the other in an indissoluble union (one flesh) and 2) openness to the transmission of life. Only in the context of legitimate marriage are these values proper to sexuality adequately respected and achieved.

If we now consider homosexual activity in the light of these objective criteria and in comparison to the heterosexual marital relationship, its intrinsic contradiction to the above-mentioned meanings is obvious. First, homosexual behavior *lacks that unitive meaning* in which "an authentic gift of self" can take place. In fact, only in the conjugal sexual relationship between a man and woman does their reciprocal complementarity, based on their sexual difference, allow them to become the "one flesh" of a communion of persons who together constitute one and the same procreating principle. The gift of self and the acceptance of the other are real because they are based on the recognition of *otherness* and on the *totality* of the act that expresses them. The gift of the body is a real sign of self-giving at the level of the persons. The meaning of one person with another is expressed with respect for the symbolism of the sexed body. It, therefore, takes place as a true gift of self and as true acceptance of another and includes body and soul in a single and intentionally totalizing act.

In the homosexual act, on the other hand, that true reciprocity that makes the gift of self and the acceptance of the other possible cannot take place. By lacking complementarity, each one of the partners remains locked in himself or herself and experiences his or her contact with the other's body merely as an opportunity for selfish enjoyment. At the same time, homosexual activity also involves the illusion of a false intimacy that is obsessively sought and constantly lacking. The other is not really "other"; he or she is like the self. In reality, he or she is only the mirror of the self, which confirms it in its own solitude exactly when the encounter is sought. This pathological "narcissism" has been identified in the homosexual personality by the studies of many psychologists (L. Ovesey, O. F. Kernberg). Hence, great instability and promiscuity prevail in the most widespread

model of homosexual life, which is why the view advanced by some of encouraging "stable" and institutionalized unions seems completely unrealistic (J. F. Harvey).

Secondly, it is obvious that the homosexual act *also lacks openness to the procreative meaning* of human sexuality. In the sexual relationship of husband and wife, their bodily act of mutual self-giving and acceptance is ordered to a further good that transcends both of them: the good of that new life which can be born from their union and to which they are called to dedicate themselves. It is the logic of love itself, which requires this further dimension and transcendence without which the sexual act risks turning in on itself by concentrating on the search for pleasure alone and literally sterilizing itself.

Through its openness to procreation, the intimate act of the spouses becomes part of time and history and is woven into the fabric of society. The homosexual act, on the contrary, has no roots in the past and does not extend to any future. It is not grafted onto the community or the succession of generations. It remains locked in an unreal moment, outside time and social responsibility. To speak of the "spiritual fruitfulness" of homosexuality is unduly to ascribe the positive aspect, which is always involved in true friendship and of which homosexual persons are also capable, to homosexual practices that are also psychologically marked by a frustrating sterility. In fact, psychologists with broad clinical experience state that, when an authentic personal friendship forms between male homosexuals, it frequently happens that they are unable to continue having sexual relations (J. Keefe).

Subjective Influences

Psychological research into homosexuality has led to connecting behavior in the sexual-genital sphere with deeper impulses linked to the person's psychological and sexual identity. This is of great importance in interpreting the phenomenon and identifying the degree of freedom and, hence, the subject's moral responsibility. In addition to episodic and occasional homosexuality in which the person's freedom to choose his or her behavior is virtually complete, there are other typologies that show a homosexual orientation symptomatic of a more generalized, or even compulsive, identity problem (J. Keefe). At the root of these inclinations, there seem to be gaps in the process of psychosexual identification rather than biological conditioning (E. R. Moberly, G. Van den Aardweg), which lead to the search for an (inadequate) response in the homosexual relationship with a parental figure of the same sex. Experience and therapeutic programs demonstrate the possibility, in many cases, of recovering a basic heterosexual identity or, at any rate, the capacity for self-control of erotic homosexual inclinations (J. F. Harvey).

Therefore, it is important, when making a moral evaluation, to draw from these psychological studies the distinction between *the homosexual condition or inclination* and *homosexual acts*. If homosexual acts must be described as intrinsically disordered because they lack an essential and indispensable goal, insofar as the homosexual orientation is not the result of morally negative choices, it cannot be defined as a sin for which persons are to be held responsible.

How then should one judge the homosexual condition or homosexual tendency that inclines the person to erotic relations with persons of the same sex? It is actually not a question of making a moral accusation against these individuals but rather of recognizing that a homosexual orientation, to the extent that it represents a more or less strong inclination to intrinsically evil behavior from the moral viewpoint, cannot be simplistically described as neutral or good. In fact, from this erroneous reasoning some people then drew the conclusion that, for homosexuals whose orientation is truly irreversible, the sexual acts they perform in relationships dictated by love would even be morally acceptable.

It seems to me that a hermeneutical key to understanding the meaning of the assertion about the intrinsic disorder of the homosexual condition can be found in the Council of Trent's definition of concupiscence. Concupiscence is not sin in the true and proper sense and is called sin by the Apostle Paul only inasmuch as "it is from sin and is inclined to sin." As happens in the case of so many other negative conditions (e.g. selfishness, the desire for power, greed, kleptomania, sadism, pyromania, etc.), human freedom can be preceded by disordered inclinations that assume a different form and force in different people. These are not sins in themselves but stem from sin, at least from original sin if not necessarily from personal sins. Above all, these inclinations tend to lead to sin.

In the light of faith, this challenge of a negative influence on freedom should be seen as a sharing in suffering and a test, in solidarity with humanity fallen in Adam. But it can become, in communion with Christ's victorious Cross and one's own ascetical struggle, an opportunity for holiness, merit, and active cooperation in Redemption.

Awareness of the complexity of the conditioning involved in the homosexual tendency requires great caution in evaluating personal responsibility for homosexual acts. Nevertheless, no matter how great the difficulties may be, it would be a serious lack of respect and consideration of their dignity to deny homosexual persons their basic freedom. *Veritatis splendor* has recalled that "together with the commandments, the Lord gives us the possibility of keeping them" and that "keeping God's law in particular situations can be difficult, extremely difficult, but it is never impossible." (n. 102) It will be the task of the Church's attentive pastoral care to offer those of her children who experience such a situation the specific care they need and deserve in the conviction that "only what is true can ultimately be pastoral." (*Homosexualitatis problema*, 1, 15)

The "Gay Culture"

A very different aspect of the question is presented by the so-called "gay culture". Today, this term is highly politicized and does not simply mean a homosexuality oriented person but one who publicly adopts a homosexual "life-style" and is committed to having it accepted by society as fully legitimate. Justifiable opposition to offenses and discrimination, which violate a person's basic rights, cannot be confused with this demand. In fact, a systematic plan for the public justification and glorification of

homosexuality is taking shape, starting with the attempt to make it fully accepted in the mind of society. It aims, through increasing pressure, at a change in legislation so that homosexual unions may enjoy the same rights as marriage, including that of adoption.

If respect for every person is promoted in society, even when he or she may privately behave according to questionable moral criteria, and if civil law is not required to impose moral values in the sphere of private life, nevertheless the State cannot fail to recognize the promotion and defense of families founded on monogamous heterosexual marriage as an essential part of the common good. A State that relinquished its primary *reason for being* would ultimately deprive itself of that healthy social fabric, generously open to life and to the proper education of the new generations, which makes possible not only a harmonious society but also the very continuation of human civilization.

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Taken from L'Osservatore Romano, 11 June 1997, p. 7