

The Catholic Church's Understanding of Homosexuality

Guest Column

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How often do we hear Christian preachers, and Christians in general, talk about the “sin of homosexuality”? Too often I hear Christians speak of *being* homosexual as sinful. At times I have difficulty discerning if the speaker is alluding to homosexuality itself or homosexual behavior. But often it is clear that he is speaking simply of a person's homosexual orientation as sinful. Many believe this is the teaching of the Catholic Church, but this is a clear misperception of the church's view of homosexuality.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops developed a letter in 1977 entitled “Always Our Children” as a pastoral message to parents of homosexual children and to pastoral ministers. In it the bishops state, “All in all, it is essential to recall one basic truth. God loves every person as a unique individual. Sexual identity helps to define the unique persons we are. One component of our sexual identity is sexual orientation. Thus, our total personhood is more encompassing than sexual orientation. Human beings see the appearance, but the Lord looks into the heart. (1Samuel 16:7) God does not love someone any less simply because he or she is homosexual. God's love is always and everywhere offered to those who are open to receiving it.”

The letter then presents five essential points of moral teaching related to this issue. First, every person has an inherent dignity because he or she is created in God's image. Thus the Catechism of the Catholic Church states that “Everyone...should acknowledge and accept his sexual identity.” Second, with the help of God's grace, everyone is called to practice the virtue of chastity in relationships, integrating one's sexual identity in a way that values and respects one's own dignity and that of others. Third, Christ summons all his followers to a higher standard of loving. In this context the letter reiterates the church's understanding of God's plan that “only with marriage does sexual intercourse fully symbolize the Creator's dual design, as an act of covenant love, with the potential of co-creating new human life.” Fourth, the fundamental human rights of homosexual persons must be defended as we strive to eliminate any form of injustice, oppression, or violence against them. Fifth, the Christian community should offer understanding and pastoral care to its homosexual brothers and sisters.

The letter concludes with a message to “our homosexual brothers and sisters,” stating, “We are called to become one body, one spirit in Christ... In you God's love is revealed. You are always our children.”

The U.S. Catholic bishops wrote another pastoral letter in 2006 entitled, “Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care.” At the time, many in the press, looking for the most controversial angle, focused on the statement that “the homosexual

inclination is objectively disordered.” But the letter went on to state, “It is crucially important to understand that saying a person has a particular inclination that is disordered is not to say that the person as a whole is disordered... While the particular inclination to homosexual *acts* is disordered, the person retains his or her intrinsic human dignity and value.”

The church’s stance comes from its belief that “the complementary sexuality of man and woman is a gift from God and ought to be respected as such,” understanding that the union of man and woman in marriage for the expression of marital love and the procreation of children “is the order of nature, an order whose source is ultimately the wisdom of God.”

In this letter the bishops encourage support groups for those with homosexual tendencies and their families, and emphasize special pastoral care for adolescents experiencing same-sex attractions.

Those who are gay and lesbian, and many others in today’s society, may not appreciate the biblical and theological foundations of the church’s beliefs concerning the purpose of sexual intercourse and their implications in relation to homosexuality. My hope, however, is that this article will clarify misperceptions people may have concerning this issue. The Catholic Church emphasizes the inherent dignity and value of each person as everyone is created in the image and likeness of God. Homosexual members of the church are “always our children.”

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